UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

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# GEORGE GISSING AND HIS CRITIC FRANK SWINNERTON

RUTH CAPERS McKAY

A THESIS

IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PHILADELPHIA

1933

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1933

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TO

MY MOTHER AND FATHER

PRINTED IN FRANCE

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## *FOREWORD*

*If Gissing was unfortunate in his biographer, Morley Roberts, he was equally unfortunate in his critic, Frank Swinnerton. To those, and they are many, who profess as Henry James said "a persistent taste for Gissing", a discussion of the entire matter cannot be but welcome. The interrelationship of the novelist, Gissing, and the critic and novelist, Swinnerton, throws much light on the work of both — and, I think, on some important features in the modern novel. In this study I have also included various data concerning Gissing and his work which I trust will at some future time be found of use in the writing of a new biography.*

*During the preparation of this study I have had the advice and encouragement of Dr. Cornelius Weygandt, and on the completed work the invaluable assistance of Dr. Felix Schelling's criticism. I wish also to express my debt of gratitude to Dr. Daniel E. Owen who has been my friend and adviser, and to acknowledge the most unusual kindness of Messrs. Algernon Gissing, Morley Roberts, Frank Swinnerton, Austin Harrison, H. G. Wells and Lloyd Garrison in their prompt and helpful replies to all of my many inquiries.*

R. C. McK.

Philadelphia, 1927.

## *CHAPTER I*

## GISSING AND HIS CRITICS

It will be conceded, I think, that an author may be fortunate or unfortunate in his critics, quite aside from the independent value of his works. To speak of destructive and constructive criticism is to use a loose phraseology, which, however, is singularly apt for the present purpose. For Frank Swinnerton in choosing two men of whom to write critical studies selected two who had fared very differently. The man concerning whom an illusion of primary greatness has arisen as a result of too much commendatory criticism is Robert Louis Stevenson. The man who has lost prestige under the depreciating efforts of both critic and biographer is George Gissing.

Swinnerton in writing of the literary qualities of Stevenson [1] had an obvious and justifiable task before him ; he had to deduct some of the superlatives and add a few words of sane and comparative judgment. That he went too far in some of his sweeping condemnations is of course true, but this was not so serious an offence when one considers that the tide had always flowed toward Stevenson, never away from him. To make himself heard Swinnerton had to speak fiercely and firmly. He succeeded in doing both. If one is not convinced that Stevenson's place is in the second rank of writers, at least one has heard the other side and is in the position to use discretion. Thus in writing of Stevenson as he did, Swinnerton rendered a certain service to literature.

When Swinnerton wrote of Gissing, however, the matter was completely reversed. In 1912, the time of the publication of the *Critical Study*, Gissing had been dead nine years and still lacked

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1. Frank Swinnerton, *Robert Louis Stevenson, a Critical Study*, London, 1914.

an adequate critical appreciation. The few things written of him, including the reviews, had been mild in praise and weak in spirit. Thomas Seccombe's introductory survey to Gissing's *House of Cobwebs*, written in a warmly appreciative tone, was as a voice crying in the wilderness. The reviewers had found themselves unable to resist comment upon the unfortunate circumstances of Gissing's life. They saw his work primarily as the revelation of an irrational character. They psychoanalyzed him from every point of view and thought that they were criticising his books. The friends [1] of literary power who might have spoken otherwise contented themselves with an occasional magazine article asserting their own friendship with the author and the understanding of his unusual nature which this acquaintance gave them. These articles, illuminating and valuable as they are, strangely neglect to attempt to make for Gissing any place as a novelist or a stylist. It seems almost too obvious that here was Swinnerton's opportunity to do literature another service, to write a really substantial critical study of Gissing, to bring the genius of the man to the attention of his contemporaries, and to speak so interestingly and well of such books as *New Grub Street, Born in Exile, The Whirlpool* and *Eve's Ransom* that an unconscious public would realize its neglect. But Swinnerton did not do this ; instead he wrote of Gissing as he wrote of Stevenson, condemning constantly, searching for weaknesses, and following even his occasional praise with some word of depreciation which contradicted the effect. In some cases his conclusions can only be construed as errors in judgment ; we are amazed, for example, at his obvious misconception of the word *abnormal*. [2] But most of all what Swinnerton lacked in his perceptive attitude toward Gissing was that something, easily discerned in a critical work, which might be termed the friendship of the critic for his author, a certain desire to do well by him which is not incompatible with sane and clear judgment. If Swinnerton had been writing of some remote figure of the Middle Ages, some person outside of his sphere of life and understanding, he could not have shown a less generous percep-

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1. Morley Roberts, Austin Harrison, H. G. Wells and an anonymous writer (" Recollections of George Gissing "). See Bibliography for articles.
2. See Chapter V.

tion, less sympathy, less warmth of feeling. Yet he tells us in his introduction to the revised edition that his own experience of the very life which Gissing lived and described gave him "a particular justification" for his criticism.

Let us review the critical material which Swinnerton had at hand when he began to write of George Gissing. There were, at the various dates of the publication of Gissing's books, reviews in the papers; these articles are interesting because of the diversity and contradictory nature of their opinions. Seldom do two writers agree in their points of praise and seldom is there more than an occasional similarity in the choice of books most admired. Some emphasize the influence of Dickens, others that of Zola or, to speak more generally, of the French school of realism. They denounce what they tenaciously term his "gloomy outlook"; they pay due, but indifferent, homage to his classic prose, and almost completely omit to mention what is undoubtedly one of his salient qualities, the power of consistent character portrayal.

When a collection of essays, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, was published in 1903, a new avenue of critical approach was opened. Was or was not Henry Ryecroft a portrait of Gissing himself? This question suggested a review of Gissing's life and gave opportunity to bring again to the attention of a shocked public (and the public could be shocked in 1903) the rather harrowing details of Gissing's early manhood. The disclosure was enough to condemn him socially, for a public which, as he pictures it in *Denzil Quarrier*, refused to let Balzac's works enter the public library, could not be expected to read and approve of a man who had been rashly sympathetic with a girl of the streets. Whether or not Gissing and Ryecroft were one was fought out in the reviews, but a final decision was never reached. Of course the extensive reader of his novels is not bothered by this question, for he has found in them many men having as full right to be Gissing himself as has Ryecroft. It is best to assume that in Ryecroft we have many of the thoughts and characteristics of a Gissing of mature years, a man who has lived, if not as he desired, at least exhaustively and who has now come to the quiet period of reflection.[1] In the Ryecroft-Gissing comparison too

1. Austin Harrison, "George Gissing," *Nineteenth Century*, LX (1906), 453. "'The thing,' he wrote to my father, eleventh of Fe-

wide an identification has been accepted. A brief outline of the qualities which Gissing had in common with Ryecroft is as follows : his love of the English countryside expressed in the novels *Will Warburton, New Grub Street, Born in Exile* and others ; his knowledge of botany ; [1] his worship of the classics and his passion for books, to which explanatory references need hardly be given ; his appetite for rich English foods, frequently mentioned by Morley Roberts in *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, a disguised biography of Gissing ; [2] and, finally, his hostility to both democracy and imperialism, an aversion shown in the biography by Roberts and in the novels, *Demos, The Whirlpool, Denzil Quarrier, Thyrza* and *Our Friend the Charlatan.*

In the novels in contrast to the essays we are more apt to find the young Gissing — the man on the brink of life, restless under the restrictions of circumstance and seething with eager futile thoughts and ambitions. But it is absurd to quote every word of Ryecroft's as Gissing's own philosophy, just as it is absurd to attempt to find in Godwin Peak or Osmond Waymark the complete Gissing. Will the critics leave nothing in these characters to the creative faculty of the author ? What is there in the genius of art if it is to portray without discrimination, to be denied the use of selection and imagination ? Furthermore, why not let Ryecroft and Peak and Waymark live for themselves — instead of tagging them as autobiographical shadows of their author and denying their existence as individuals ?

Among the early critics of Gissing there were some who had

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bruary 1903, ' is much more an aspiration than a memory. I hope that too much will not be made of the few autobiographical papers in the book. ' ''

It is interesting to note that Gissing spoke of the book as an " aspiration ". Evidently the cottage in Devon was to him a dream home, the sum of all his desires, and the neat, obsequious and speechless housekeeper, his ideal helpmate.

1. Austin Harrison, *Frederic Harrison, Thoughts and Memories*, London, 1926, 110. " ' He is a botanist ; ' he told us subsequently, ' knows the name of every fern and wild flower. ' "

2. Morley Roberts would have us believe that a large share of Gissing's discontent while living in southern France was due to the fact that his wife, a French woman, insisted upon serving him French cooking, which he detested. *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* were being written at this time, so, perhaps, we may consider the well known eulogy of the English roast as the inspired words of a hungry man.

been fortunate enough to be his friends. These were Morley Roberts, Frederic and Austin Harrison, H. G. Wells, Arthur Waugh and Thomas Seccombe. Morley Roberts was Gissing's life-long associate — their friendship starting from an acquaintance at Owens College, Manchester, when Gissing was barely sixteen and continuing with few interruptions until that unhappy hour when Roberts stood alone in a little cemetery in southern France. It was one of those friendships, strangely common, between two natures which held little resemblance. But they had one binding tie — their love of literature. It is therefore almost ironic that Roberts was later to exercise so unfortunately his literary theories in writing a biography of Gissing. In apparent contradiction of his biographical ideals, complete frankness and truth, Roberts determined that it was best to write this biography using disguised names. It is entitled *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* ; Gissing is, of course, Maitland, and an elaborate system is devised, substituting other names (in a few cases amusingly suggestive) for places, friends, books and even the characters in books. The result is both annoying and confusing. In fact the plan seems to be to veil and yet reveal, to erect a discreet façade before obvious indiscretion.

In order to simplify the matter I have worked out the identifications of most of the names and verified them by letters and by reference to books and articles. The men mentioned in this biography are disguised in this fashion : Frederic Harrison as Harold Edgeworth, Lord Morley as John Harley, Bullen as Butler, Arthur Waugh as Edwin Warren, H. G. Wells as G. H. Rivers, Thomas Seccombe as Thomas Sackville, Edward Clodd [1] as Edward Roden, James Payn as John Glass, and William Lloyd Garrison as Lloyd Garrison. Gissing's publishers are disguised thus : Remington & Company as Hamerton's, Chapman and Hall as Andrews & Company, and Smith Elder & Company as Miller & Company. Places and schools are renamed also : Alderley Edge, the town where Gissing attended grammar school, is spoken of as Mirefields ; Owens College, Manchester, as Moorhampton College, and 7 K Cornwall Residences, Regents Park, N. W. (London) as 7 K Cumberland Residences. The books are spoken

1. Edward Clodd in his book *Memories* suggests some of these identifications.

of under the following disguised titles : Gissing's *Workers in the Dawn* as *Children of the Dawn, Isabel Clarendon* as *Isabel, The Unclassed* as *Outside the Pale, Demos* as *The Mob, New Grub Street* as *Paternoster Row, A Life's Morning* as *In the Morning, The Whirlpool* as *The Vortex, The Crown of Life* as *The Best of All Things, The Odd Women* as *The Unchosen, The Nether World* as *The Underworld, The Emancipated* as *Bound and Free, Born in Exile* as *The Exile, Thyrza* as *The Flower, Veranilda* as *Basil, The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* as *Meditations of Mark Summer, By the Ionian Sea* as *Magna Graecia, Charles Dickens* as *Victorian Novelists,* Forster's *Life of Dickens* as Mayhew's *Life of Dickens,* and *The Pall Mall Gazette* as *The Piccadilly Gazette.* The characters in Gissing's novels are similarly disguised : Harvey Rolfe *(The Whirlpool)* as Raymond *(The Vortex),* Ida Starr *(The Unclassed)* as Hilda Moon *(Outside the Pale),* 'Arry Mutimer *(Demos)* as 'Arry Parsons *(The Mob),* Reuben Elgar *(The Emancipated)* as Hillward *(Bound and Free),* Ross Mallard *(The Emancipated)* as Mallow *(Bound and Free),* Godwin Peak *(Born in Exile)* as George Hardy or Pick [1] *(The Exile),* Sidwell Warricombe *(Born in Exile)* as Isabel *(The Exile),* Earwaker *(Born in Exile)* as Early *(The Exile),* Mr. Warricombe *(Born in Exile)* as Mr. Comberbatch *(The Exile),* Reardon *(New Grub Street)* as Maydon or Hendon [1] *(Paternoster Row),* Biffen *(New Grub Street)* as Gifford *(Paternoster Row),* Amy Reardon *(New Grub Street)* as Anne *(Paternoster Row),* Milvain *(New Grub Street).* as Medwin *(Paternoster Row),* and Whelpdale *(New Grub Street)* as Broughton *(Paternoster Row).*

On the publication of this book by Morley Roberts there were reviewers who criticised it severely [2] and lamented lest this masquerade-biography should become a common practice. The danger of this method is at once apparent. It allows the intimate friend to reveal without reserve that which he could hardly have dared to state in open language. The example at hand is enough to condemn the species. It is a biography such as might be written by a person who, while visiting within the narrow confines of an impoverished household, noted the makeshifts and the trials,

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1. In two cases the disguise is not consistently carried out.
2. "Body Snatching in Fiction," *Literary Digest,* XLV (1912), 1180.

the unclean pans and the unmade beds, and wrote each down that the world might know.[1] These intimate portrayals of the pettiness in the lives of authors are a sad contribution to the progress of sound literary history. The human mind is so much more easily impressed by the personal than by the impersonal.

It is to Roberts' credit that he frequently tried to save Gissing from himself. He recognized Gissing's need for happy companionship and realized that a marriage based on a firm foundation of cultural equality was the best solution for him. But Gissing in his younger days was in the position of many of his heroes, young men of scholarly and refined instincts who found themselves unfortunately without the money to marry and support a woman of their own class. Therefore they had to choose one to whom the sharing of a meager life would not be unfair. Gissing's *New Grub Street* is a complete and searching study of this problem. There is Alfred Yule, a literary critic, who in his impecunious youth had married an assistant in a chandler's shop, a kind but dull and illiterate woman whose face " had the look of one who is making a painful effort to understand something ". Of this marriage Gissing writes, " Many a man with brains but no money has been compelled to the same step. Educated girls have a profound distaste for London garrets ; not one in fifty thousand would share poverty with the brightest genius ever born ". Beside Yule's state may be placed that of Edward Reardon who on the strength of a small success as a novelist married a woman of refinement and ambition. Their slow degradation into hopeless poverty and the anguish of mind which completely overcomes them marks the inevitable tragedy of such a course. Then there is poor Biffen whom the author has endowed with the finest mind of them all and the scantiest portion of this world's goods. " Whenever he heard of a poor man's persuading a woman to share his poverty he was eager of details ; perchance he himself yet might have that heavenly good fortune. " And as a climax to all this one should read those pages given over to an exposition of that " well-known category of men with unpresentable wives ".

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1. Morley Roberts was more fortunate in his friends, Gissing and W. H. Hudson, than they were in him. He wrote of them both with candour and we know as much of the unpleasant characteristics of Mrs. Hudson as we do of the first and second Mrs. Gissing. See Morley Roberts, *W. G. Hudson, a Portrait,* New York, 1924.

Now to a man who saw as clearly as Gissing does in this novel, the problems and frustrations of his own life were terrible indeed. He visioned them in the guise of tragedy. They were the workings of a cruel and unchangeable fate. What use was there to battle against them ? For this so-called weakness of character Morley Roberts has little sympathy, he is impatient with Gissing's lack of common sense.

We cannot but feel that with the understanding granted by a friendship of years and an admiration for the toil which lies behind sincere literary production there might have been written a beautiful and forgiving tale of this most unhappy life. [1] For Gissing, to use an old phrase, was his own worst enemy ; in friendship he was tender and generous, as may be seen in his letters to Edward Clodd — and of him Thomas Seccombe has written he was "a soul of goodness in things evil". [2] In reference to this biography by Morley Roberts, Swinnerton has said, "It was hastily written and provoked a great deal of adverse criticism because of its candid portraiture, which some readers considered spiteful. In that estimate these readers did Mr. Morley Roberts a grave injustice". [3] And Swinnerton goes on to explain that a new edition was published in 1923, some eleven years later, in which much of the material was happily revised. Surely this revision proves the original mistake. But Swinnerton, probably with his own revised edition in mind, seems to feel that the revision of an opinion even some years later may quite nullify the unfortunate effects of the original. The efficiency of such disavowals of former criticism in changing the resulting prejudice may well be questioned ; particularly in the case of these two revised editions, Roberts' and Swinnerton's, where the revision is acclaimed in the introduction but scarcely noticeable in the text. One may suggest without malice that the growing interest in Gissing

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1. It is not without significance that Roberts admits in *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* that some of Gissing's executors and friends were far from enthusiastic at the thought of his writing Gissing's biography. "Perhaps it is necessary," said one, "that his story should be written by all sorts of people from different points of view."

2. Thomas Seccombe, Introduction to the *House of Cobwebs*, London, 1906, p. x.

3. Frank Swinnerton, *George Gissing, a Critical Study*, Revised Edition, 1923. See Note to Bibliography.

in America as well as in England may have led both critics to view with uneasiness their earlier efforts and to endeavor to correct their more hasty decisions.

While seeking some information on George Gissing's life I received a letter from his brother, Algernon Gissing, in which he suggested that a critical study of Gissing would be more acceptable than a biographical one, giving as the reason the fact that so much that has been published concerning Gissing's life is "largely mythical". The recent publication of the *Letters of George Gissing to Members of his Family*, edited by Algernon and Ellen Gissing, is the first substantial step toward a new biography of Gissing. While one cannot but regret the ruthless manner in which the editors have deleted passages in the letters and the scarcity of editorial notes, one realizes that these letters reveal a new Gissing, more rational than irrational, more lovable and human even if less sensationally interesting. The letters give evidence of a life in which there was a fair balance of light and shadow and a predominating tone of social orthodoxy, all quite in contrast to the constant depression and moral laxity in Morley Roberts' portrayal. The most valuable element in the letters is the intimate record they present of Gissing's literary life, his views on literature, his methods of work, his aspirations as a novelist — for the first time we really meet the man behind the books.

It is a pleasure to speak of Thomas Seccombe's admirable survey of Gissing's work. In 1906 when the *House of Cobwebs*, a collection of short stories by Gissing, was prepared for publication, Seccombe as critic and friend was asked to write the introduction. To this task he brought a mind of critical astuteness, a strong grasp of the literary background, and a rich knowledge of Gissing and love for him. If Mr. Seccombe could have found reason to expand this article to book length there would have been little to fear from subsequent critical studies. However, Seccombe's critical introduction stands as simply a survey, its chief characteristic being its appreciative quality.

But it is our task to discover just what are the salient points of Mr. Seccombe's criticism, just how much of a background he may have furnished for Swinnerton. In a preliminary way he suggests the historical heritage of Gissing's novels, calling to mind their mid-Victorian legacy of "moral thesis, plot, underplot,

set characters, descriptive machinery, landscape colouring, copious phraseology, etc." and the gigantic problem presented by the necessary assimilation. From this he turns to quite another matter — the scholarly style and appeal of Gissing's work, which scarcely suffers from his frequent choice of sordid material. The main portion of the text, however, consists of a chronological consideration of Gissing's books, beginning with *Workers in the Dawn*, a boyhood effort, and progressing with astonishing ease and lack of tedium to the final writing of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* and *Veranilda*. Mr. Seccombe, with that strange diversity of judgment which leads all of Gissing's critics to differ as to his best works, rates highest his critical studies of Dickens and his books in the essay manner, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* and the travel sketch *By the Ionian Sea*. He concedes, however, that *New Grub Street* and the short stories might be placed with them. My personal explanation of this preference is that in the essay form Gissing was not driven to working out a plot or to filling three volumes with his subject and therefore wrote with greater ease and more enjoyment. One is not conscious of a certain laboriousness, the result of the author's exhaustion, which now and then appears in the writing of the novels. And we are hard task masters, we are quick to find fault if even the best of authors,[1] having created a handful of characters, shows signs of fatigue when he faces the necessity of carrying the reality of these frail fabrics over four or five hundred pages. For we are aware that true art is not labored, it must have spontaneity and grace — two qualities not attained by effort but divinely granted. Thus to a certain degree Mr. Seccombe's choice is justified.

To write charmingly of a man is to lead others to his works; this is the golden gift which only a critic or a biographer may present to an author and which only Thomas Seccombe has presented to Gissing. In tone with the whole are his concluding words, "That he will *sup late*, our Gissing, we are quite content to believe. But that a place is reserved for him, of that at any rate we are reasonably confident."

When Gissing was in his early twenties he served as tutor in the family of Frederic Harrison, the noted Positivist. One of the

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1. One frequently hears that some passages in Scott, Dickens or Thackeray are "labored".

sons, Austin Harrison, became very fond of his teacher and has written some fleeting recollections [1] of him which in my opinion are the most sympathetic and perceptive portrayals that we have of Gissing's unusual personality. Austin Harrison does not attempt to discuss Gissing's works, in fact he makes no pretence to criticism, but in such a passage as this he shows his rare understanding :

> Gissing was an artist ; a contemplative individualist ; a man influenced by the mood of the sky, the procession of the year, by circumstance and environment... By nature he was made for the life of tranquillity and meditation, for cultured leisure and repose... In other circumstances he might have been a university don, a famous scholar, have amassed learning and fame... A library was to him a garden of roses ; he loved books as women love flowers, emotionally, instinctively. He had a Grecian love for all beauty. [2]

Another friend who has written with interest but at no great length upon George Gissing is H. G. Wells. [3] As would be expected Wells has little sympathy for the irrationality of Gissing's temperament, the incapacity for doing the sensible thing, and he regrets what he terms Gissing's lack of " social nerve ". In reference to the novels Wells expresses an opinion which is generally accepted by Seccombe, Roberts and others, namely that novel writing was not Gissing's natural forte but that he was driven to it by the literary fashions and demands of his age. This idea is to a certain extent erroneous for it gives the impression that Gissing wrote novels because he had to, not from any choice or desire of his own. The truth of the matter is that it was Gissing's greatest ambition to succeed as a novelist — not as an essayist or a critic. In 1887 he write to his sister Ellen,

> In truth I think of very little but Art, pure and simple, and all my work is profoundly pessimistic as far as mood goes. Never mind, if I live another ten years, there shall not be many contemporary

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1. Austin Harrison, *Frederic Harrison, Thoughts and Memories*, London, 1926, pp. 80-84, 89, 110-112.
2. Austin Harrison, " George Gissing, " *Nineteenth Century*, LX (1906), 453.
3. H. G. Wells, " The Novels of Mr. George Gissing, " *Contemporary Review*, LXXII (1897), 192 ff. — " George Gissing, An Impression, " (Originally written as a preface to *Veranilda*), *Monthly Review*, XVI, n° 2 (1904), 160 ff.

novelists ahead of me, for I am only beginning my work. Thirty years of age this coming November. Well, Scott and Thackeray did not begin till they were forty, and did a vast deal after that. I don't know where you will find room for my books by that time. [1]

While it is a doubtful procedure to quote the words of any character as the author's own opinion, yet this passage spoken by Osmand Waymark in *The Unclassed* is too suggestive to be omitted :

Let me get a little more experience, and I will write a novel such as no one has yet ventured to write, at all events in England. I begin to see my way to magnificent effects ; ye gods, such light and shade ! The fact is, the novel of every day life is getting worn out. We must dig deeper, get into untouched social strata. Dickens felt this, but he had not the courage to face his subject ; his monthly numbers had to lie on the family tea-table. Not *Virginibus Puerisque* will be my book, I assure you, but for men and women who like to look beneath the surface, and who understand that only as artistic material has human life any significance... Life as the source of splendid pictures, inexhaustible material for effects — *that* can reconcile me to existence, and that only.

In some few cases Gissing's novels were undoubtedly written for the needed recompense [2] but many others were conceived at times when he was financially able to have turned to the essay had he so desired. Gissing states his situation thus in a letter to his sister Ellen.

I cannot and will not be reckoned among the petty scribblers of the day, and to avoid it, I must for a time issue only one novel a year, and each book must have a distinct character, a book which no one else would be likely to have written. I have got a solid basis, and something shall be reared upon it.

Don't desert me in the struggle, and try and have some faith in the result. I want money and all it will bring very badly, but I want a respectable position in literature yet more. When I write, I think of my *best* readers, not of the mob. The demand for my books is steadily increasing, and will do. Mudie, I hear, took sixty copies of *Thyrza* to begin with, and has sent for another twenty-five since.

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1. *Letters of George Gissing to His Family*, Boston & New York, 1927, p. 193.
2. The obvious " pot boilers " are *The Town Traveller*, *The Paying Guest* and *Sleeping Fires*. Ironically enough a copy of the first edition of *The Paying Guest* now sells for thirty-six dollars.

Over against this put the fact that he has just taken 2,000 of Rider Haggard's new book. [1]

In the face of these quotations it is difficult for us to believe that Gissing at heart an essayist was driven to novel writing by fashion and necessity. Think of the magnitude, the aspiring proportion of such books as *Demos, Born in Exile, New Grub Street* and *The Whirlpool* and then compare it with the modest and unambitious plan of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft,* which Gissing in a letter to Edward Clodd termed simply "an odd thing". [2] Furthermore the travel sketch, *By the Ionian Sea,* delightful as it is, has no pretentions to a major scope ; in fact, much of its charm lies in its unassuming simplicity. As to the critical studies of Dickens, Morley Roberts makes it uncomfortably plain that the writing of these was to Gissing mere hack-work, a way to fill the fast emptying pocket. [3] It is of course quite another question to decide whether Gissing's greatest ability was shown as an essayist or a novelist. The point to make clear here is that Gissing *though choice* used the major part of his creative energy in the writing of novels. Undue emphasis upon the monetary side of his novel writing sheds a doubtful light upon the books and leads to their neglect by the reading public.

In this chapter we have sketched the background consisting of the valuable and illuminating articles by Austin Harrison and H. G. Wells, the disguised biography of Gissing by Morley Roberts (which, however, was published almost simultaneously with Swinnerton's study), and the charming introductory survey by Thomas Seccombe, [4] — the background against which Swinnerton

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1. *Letters of George Gissing to His Family,* p. 196.
2. Edward Clodd, *Memories,* New York, 1916, p. 178. "An odd thing (not a novel) called *An Author at Grass,* which I have taken two years to write — at intervals — will begin to appear serially in the *Fortnightly.* I shall be disappointed if you do not like it. For it is written for people like you, whom the general uproar of things does not deafen to still small voices."
3. Morley Roberts, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland,* p. 136. "It seems to be commonly thought that Maitland wrote his book about the Victorian novelists, not only with the sympathy which he expressed but with considerable joy in the actual work. This is not true, for he regarded it essentially as a pot-boiler, and did it purely for money... Indeed, he actually disliked the work, and had no desire to do it, well as it was done."
4. For the sake of completeness there should be mentioned Arthur

was to place his critical study. Harrison and Wells described the Gissing personality. Morley Roberts wrote a sensational disguised biography in which he attempted to prove the frustration of Gissing's life both as man and author. Seccombe writing from a purely literary point of view stressed the importance of Gissing's historical position as a novelist and his claim to eminence as a first class stylist in English prose. Much of this early writing, particularly that of Harrison, Wells and Seccombe, is of admirable quality and perhaps some will feel that the error lay not in what was said so much as in what was not said. The next project is to treat of Swinnerton's contribution to Gissing criticism — a larger task than may be undertaken within the confines of this chapter.

The only criticism of Gissing published within the last decade and a half, with the exception of an occasional article and a few interesting introductions,[1] is a study of some proportions by May Yates, issued by the University of Manchester Press. This book considers Gissing as a whole, laying emphasis upon the more pleasing qualities of his personality and his work. Although it is distinguished by a quiet and generous manner which does not provoke disagreement, one realizes that here is lacking the critical brilliance which claimed for Swinnerton's study immediate prominence. Miss Yates in spite of her valiant effort is unable to offset Swinnerton. She mentions him but infrequently and then with scorn, giving small countenance to his abstract conclusions.

This study *George Gissing and His Critic Frank Swinnerton* has two purposes, a major and a minor; the first and major purpose is a consideration of all Gissing criticism, stressing its errors as well as its truths, with particular emphasis on the criticism by Swinnerton. The second and minor purpose is to show the influence of Gissing on Swinnerton's novels, not with the desire to minimize Swinnerton's individuality as a novelist but rather to elucidate the extent of his debt in style, form, and thought to the man whom he so extensively criticised.

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Waugh's capable article on Gissing in the *Fortnightly Review*, LXXXI (1904), 244 ff., and Arnold Bennett's short criticism of Gissing in his book *Fame and Fiction* (London, 1901).

1. See Bibliography for introductions written by Paul Elmer More, Temple Scott, Harry Hansen, and Vincent Starrett.

## *CHAPTER II*

## GISSING'S PERSONALITY

Swinnerton tells us that Gissing was an egotist because he was " temperamentally unhappy " and because " he did not love his fellow men ". Whether Gissing suffered from temperament or not, and he did, his life taken as a whole was enough to make any normal being unhappy. Before he was twenty he had disgraced himself and ruined his reputation for life. A charge of stealing from one's fellow students is not easily forgotten in any civilized community. The act showed weakness of character, a weakness which Gissing seems to have outgrown,[1] but the memory of it was always there to taunt him and being an exceedingly sensitive nature he dreaded the scorn of his fellow men.

Coupled with this memory of the past was the unhappy present. Neither the first nor the second Mrs. Gissing was a fortunate selection. The first Mrs. Gissing was the girl upon whom he had taken pity and stolen to support. But her previous life as a woman of the streets, and the tastes (including that for drink) there acquired, were little mitigated by marriage and for the husband the situation became increasingly difficult. The second Mrs. Gissing was married after a very short acquaintance. Morley Roberts tells us that Gissing became lonely and morbid, rushed out into the street and spoke to the first woman he met. Ellen Gissing, his sister, in writing of his second marriage, has said :

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1. Note this interesting passage in *Isabel Clarendon*. The speaker is Kingcote. " ' I deny identity, ' he added with sudden bitterness. ' How can one be held responsible for the thoughts and acts of the being who bore his name years ago ? The past is no part of our existing self ; we are free of it, it is buried. That release is the pay Time owes us for doing his work. ' "

" Never could any man have had less discernment in choosing his friends ; it is therefore not surprising that his second marriage should once more have brought him infinite misery and a renewal of the old domestic discord. " [1]

Add to these tragic events, the chronic ill health which Gissing suffered and the necessity of unceasing mental toil under which he labored to provide for himself and his family, and one finds enough to weaken any man's joy in life. It was more than temperament which made Gissing unhappy, it was the unpleasant circumstances which he constantly had to face, and the haunting memories of his own indiscretions which had made such misery possible.

Swinnerton's second explanation of Gissing's egotism is that he " did not love his fellow men ". " He had suffered much, and he was, during the greater part of his life, expressing his suffering in terms of his distaste. " Gissing did not in the abstract sense love his fellow men. We feel this in comparing him to Dickens who was able to give a warmly agreeable quality even to the most dirty and despicable of his personages. A comparison may be made between low class London life as portrayed by Dickens and as portrayed by Gissing. In reading Dickens we may be contemptuous but we are amused ; in reading Gissing, for example, *The Town Traveller*, which was written in the closest approach to Dickens' jovial style, we only feel disgust for these people and the life which they lived, in spite of a certain amount of rough humor here which is elsewhere lacking in Gissing. [2] Gissing saw his characters as clearly as did Dickens but he saw them without humor and largely without sentiment. And no one denied humor and sentiment can look at his fellow men and with reason, love them. Gissing was not a Christian, he had no creed of brotherly love to sweeten the bitterness of experience, none of the sentiments in

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1. Ellen Gissing, " George Gissing, a Character Sketch, " *Nineteenth Century*, CII (September, 1927) : 422.

2. Gissing himself recognized the difference between his own aims and those of Dickens. " Certainly I have struck out a path for myself in fiction, for one cannot, of course, compare my methods and aims. with those of Dickens. I mean to bring home to people the ghastly condition (material, mental, and moral) of our poor classes, to show the hideous injustice of our whole system of society, to give light upon the plan of altering it, and, above all, to preach an enthusiasm for just and high *ideals* in this age of unmitigated egotism and shop. I shall never write a book which does not keep all these ends in view. " *(Letters of George Gissing to His Family*, p. 83).

regard to life which are frequently the staff of the unfortunate. He had only a cruelly clear power of perception and a brain filled with the good and bad of knowledge, by which to judge. It is no wonder that his greatest genius lay in irony.

Swinnerton says of Gissing, " His anger with the conditions of life was the anger simply of a man who finds himself out of sympathy with his familiars. It was instinctive, not philosophic, not social. " This conclusion cannot but give a most unfortunate and false impression ; one envisages a social neurotic without the slightest charm or even worth of mind. The idea is evidently derived from the fact that while Gissing criticised social conditions he suggested no remedy ; he was not a reformer in the full sense of the word. He expressed his dissatisfaction, for example, with the position of intelligent and cultured men who lack sufficent income to live decently, and with the ambiguous chances for livlihood presented to a woman if she refuses, or is denied, matrimony, and with the education of children which leads to a pugnacious patriotism and eventually to war, and with the wretched living conditions of the London poor. But because he formulated no theory of reconstruction, no soothing philosophy to act as antidote, Swinnerton concludes that his anger was instinctive and personal — and another example of his egotism. But it is a wrong and unjust estimate of the man to claim that Gissing's dissatisfaction with life was centered completely in himself. Even though he was incensed at the trials and restrictions of his own life (and who would not have been ?) he was equally indignant over the problems of others — the crushing conditions of the Nether World or the all-enveloping superficiality of lower middle class life. It is difficult to understand how any reader of his books could fail to see the pathos in many of his presentations of character, the pathos which could have its birth only in sympathy.

Gissing's skepticism presented two aspects, he had faith neither in God nor in man. He was not one who looked to the ultimate salvation of the human race. He felt that, if anything, evil might prevail. In his novels he is not given to the happy ending ; he could not in sincerity conceive one, and what he could not say with sincerity was to him lacking in the first quality of art. [1] Neither

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1. Note the following reference to *A Life's Morning*.
" It seems that Glass (Payne), who had naturally enough, consider-

did he believe in democracy ; with Carlyle he trembled at the thought of Demos ruling. He doubted the intelligence of the masses — but surely many men of brains and vision entertain similar distrust. Furthermore in agreement with Carlyle Gissing's scornful ire extended even to the ruling classes ; he saw little virtue in his own English Parliament. When Wilfrid Athel in *A Life's Morning* abandoned his scholarly solitude and decided to use his ability to shine as a member of Parliament, Gissing sneers at this as a sign of Athel's weakening before the flesh pots. Gissing did not see politics as the refuge of the real thinker, the man of parts. *Denzil Quarrier* is an extended satire on the shallow politics in rural communities, and no one in reading it can fail to perceive the author's ironical point of view. He detested imperialism. He loved England, but it was her countryside and her literature which filled him with reverence, not her martial history or her commercial progress. So, too, did philosophy fail him, for while in his early days he read and studied the German philosophers, Gœthe, Haeckel, and Schopenhauer, and then turned to France, to Comte and Positivism ; yet these did not last — he outlived his beliefs. [1]

Morley Roberts wrote at some length in *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* to make it quite plain that Gissing belonged to no church and accepted no creed. Swinnerton does not bother

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ing his period, certain old-fashioned ideas on the subject of books and their endings, absolutely and flatly declined to recommend his firm to publish *In the Morning (A Life's Morning)*, unless Maitland (Gissing) rewrote the natural tragic end of the book and made it turn out happily. I think nothing on earth, or in some hell for men of letters, could have made Maitland more angry and wretched. If there was one thing that he clung to during the whole of his working time, it was sincerity, and sincerity in literary work implies an absolute freedom from alien and extrinsic influences. I can well remember what he said to me about Glass' suggestion. He abused him and the publishers, the public, England, the world, and the very universe. He almost burst into tears as he explained to me what he had been obliged to do for the sake of the great fifty pounds he was to get for the book. " (Morley Roberts, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, pp. 88-89).

1. Even as early as 1883, before he was out of his twenties, Gissing wrote : " I am by degrees getting my right place in the world. Philosophy has done all it can for me, and now scarcely interests me any more. My attitude henceforth is that of the artist pure and simple. The world is for me a collection of phenomena, which are to be studied and reproduced artistically. " (*Letters of George Gissing to His Family*, p. 128).

with the subject at all. And yet it sheds some interesting light on various features of Gissing's novels as well as on his life. While Gissing had no religion to guide his actions, nevertheless with few exceptions he was orthodox in his relations with his fellow men. In five of his novels, *Workers in the Dawn*, *Born in Exile*, *Denzil Quarrier*, *Isabel Clarendon*, and *Demos* there are clergymen as characters and some of these are treated with irony — but with no more irony, may I suggest, than has been shown toward churchmen by many writers of avowed religious faith. There is Chilvers in *Born in Exile*, " the sleek clerical advocate of ' Less St. Paul and more Darwin, less of Luther and more of Herbert Spencer, ' " and Vialls in *Denzil Quarrier*, who is drawn in lines of clear caricature. Over against these two travesties may be placed the charming rector, Mr. Vissian, in *Isabel Clarendon*, whose love of books amounts almost to a passion and who discourses delightfully upon first editions and Shakespearean texts, and as a fourth, the kindly and philosophic Mr. Wyvern in *Demos*. There is nowhere in Gissing's books any direct criticism of the church ; instead one finds a lenient tone potent in its suggestiveness. [1]

In one of Gissing's letters to his brother Algernon, written in 1880 when he was only a young man of twenty-three, we come upon this passage of remarkably pure and mature thought.

" For, though I myself look forward to no future world where the negligences of this may be made up for, I do not on that account say, ' let us eat and drink for to-morrow we die '. The immortality of man consists in this reflection that not a word we utter, not a thought we think, not a battle we win, not a temptation we yield to, but has, and *must* have, influence upon those living in contact with us, and from them, like circles spreading in a pool, extends to the whole future human race. Therefore it is of vast importance to me whether I set an example of an ignorant and foolish man, or of one bent upon using his faculties to the utmost. " [2]

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1. In illustration of the " lenient tone " this passage from *Eve's Ransom* is chosen. " Easter Sunday. As he walked on, he pondered the Christian story, and tried to make something out of it. Had it any significance for *him* ? Perhaps, for he had never consciously discarded the old faith ; he had simply let it fall out of his mind. But a woman ought to have religious convictions. Yes, he saw the necessity of that. Better for him if Eve were in the Town Hall yonder, joining her voice with those that sang. "

2. *Letters of George Gissing to His Family*, p. 69.

That Gissing's mind dwelt upon these matters of immortality and the relation of the individual to the universe, there is not a doubt. So, too, did he seek the explanation of creation and life. Not long before his death in 1903 he wrote to Edward Clodd :

" That there is *some order, some purpose,* seems a certainty ; my mind at all events, refuses to grasp an idea of a Universe which means nothing at all. But just as unable am I to accept any of the solutions ever proposed. Above all it is the existence of a natural beauty which haunts my thoughts. I can, for a time, forget the world's horrors ; I can never forget the flower by the wayside and the sun falling in the west. These things have a meaning — but I doubt, I doubt — whether the mind of man will ever be permitted to know it. " [1]

As Gissing had no faith in a personal God it was necessary for him, as it is for all other skeptics, to use the idolatrous impulse in his nature for other images. Gissing not consciously but unconsciously made a religion of his devotion to art. [2] It was to him a soul-pervading force, the essence of all that was beautiful and good ; a master who would accept none but the best and to whom it was a sin to offer less. He could not write as the journalist writes [3] because his nature revolted ; he could not produce careless or heedless prose ; at all times he pushed himself to the perfection dictated by his devotion to art. Of this Swinnerton says, " He was flogging his brain all his life, sustained only by the self-confidence which was part of his nature, which drew him apart from his schoolfellows, and made him to the end a solitary figure. " *Sustained only*

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1. Edward Clodd, *Memories,* p. 181.

2. These three quotations all concerning art and from *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* are among the best things which Gissing has said.

" For the Poet is indeed the Maker : above the world of sense, trodden by hidebound humanity, he builds that world of his own whereto is summoned the unfettered spirit. "

" Let every land have joy of its poet ; for the poet is the land itself, all its greatness and its sweetness, all that incommunicable heritage for which men live and die. "

" It has occurred to me that one might define Art as : an expression, satisfying and abiding, of the Zest of life. "

3. Austin Harrison. *Frederic Harrison, Thoughts and Memories,* pp. 83-84. " My father advised him to write for John (Lord) Morley, then editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette,* and Gissing wrote an article or two and then mysteriously stopped. He told us he thought it, ' degrading ' to write on a newspaper. My father was annoyed about this, but Gissing could not be persuaded to resume such ' preposterous trash ' as he called it. "

*by self-confidence?* Was he not rather sustained by that striving for the ideal which to those who possess ability is the force behind all creation ? No, says Swinnerton, " It was ambition — at conflict with itself, often varying, never defined by any instinct other than that of feverish application — that poisoned Gissing's life. As a boy he made up his mind to *be* something ; and his lifelong dissatisfaction was largely due to the feeling that he was not achieving his end. Only so can we understand his complaints of the world. " One cannot discount ambition as a motive but noble ambition such as the finer artists are often capable of is purely *objective.* Gissing was always the artist first, the man, second. You may say that this is a fine point, too small for notice, but it is in such conclusions as this that one finds the core of misinterpretation.

Arthur Waugh in a critical article has explained admirably the Gissing point of view. He says,

> " A truer artist, a more conscientious and sincere workman than George Gissing never lived. He made no compromise with fortune, permitted no suspicion of disloyalty to his own ideal. He ranged himself from the outset with those who out of the very integrity of their point of view, are forced, as it were, ' to paint the thing as they see it for the God of things as they are ; ' and it was simply impossible for his open and honest nature to paint or to imagine anything else. " [1]

These words we may whole-heartedly accept — they ring true upon first reading. There is no attempt here to analyze ambition until it becomes vanity or pure egotism.

Gissing was a hard worker, his incentives pushed him to almost superhuman endeavor, but Swinnerton sees nothing in this which is admirable. On the other hand he writes, " He (Gissing) lived always at high pressure striving for something beyond his attainment. His was not quite a first class brain ; the strength of desire made him strive to do with sweat and toil what a man with less sense of personal value would have left undone. " Swinnerton never manages to stray very far away from his original idea that the ruling motive in Gissing's life was egotism. He tells us here that Gissing's mental equipment was second rate but that his egotism (disguised under the words " sense of personal value ")

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1. Arthur Waugh, " George Gissing, " *Fortnightly Review,* LXXXI (1904), 245.

drove him to do things which it would have been better if he had left undone. To what does Swinnerton refer ? Does he refer to the ambitious plan of some of Gissing's novels ? He declares somewhere later in the study that it was absurd for Gissing to have written a book entitled, *The Whirlpool*, which is supposed to represent the turmoil of life. He comments also on the aspiring plan of *Demos*, *The Nether World*, and *In the Year of Jubilee*, suggesting that they are " would-be " masterpieces. Now this criticism is only justified if it is true that Gissing's more ambitious novels were failures. As an artistic whole they lack perfection, a common fault in three-volume novels, but that does not place them as unsuccessful attempts at greatness. We must judge them in relation to their kind, the novel of George Eliot, Dickens, Thackeray, and Meredith. Are they then failures ?

In *Demos* Gissing intended to portray the fallacy of that human philosophy, democracy. The plot may not quite have reached its intended pinnacle of universal significance ; but the story carries, it is splendidly told ; the social distinctions sketched with a masterly touch ; the conclusions reasonably attained. In criticism Swinnerton has said that the plot is poor because it is based on an old device, the finding of a lost will.[1] But Dickens and George Eliot and many other Victorians of reputation used this point in plot, and their books did not lack greatness on that account. And what of *The Whirlpool*, which Swinnerton characterizes as an absurd effort ? The story principally concerns a young couple who have the natural desire to find happiness and satisfaction in life. The wife, however, has certain failings, certain irrational qualities in her nature which render it impossible for them to attain that which seemingly lies in their very hands. There is a remarkable scene near the end of the book where Alma, Harvey Rolfe's wife, begins to show the mental breaking which has come as the result of heredity and vacillating character. She begs Harvey to believe that she was right, that she had cause for slandering their friends, and Harvey, realizing that his wife's brain is weakening, promises her unquestioning belief and the assurance of his love, although he fully understands that there is no truth or justice in her claims. It is a scene which once read is too poignant to be

1. One of Swinnerton's more recent novels *The Georgian House* has a plot based upon this same old device.

forgotten ; all the disillusionment and misery of ruined opportunity seem to be bound up in the relations of this man and woman. Surely this book and others equally as fine cannot be cast aside as futile attempts !

But as Swinnerton sees in Gissing's character only the elements of egotism, so in his art he sees only frustration. Gissing's brain, so he says, matured early and was forced into certain grooves. " So he began as a frustrate man of talent... He could not see an incident without spinning from it — not a story, but a series of reflections. He was an essayist, a writer upon moral themes ; and he began to write novels. What could be expected from such equipment ? " And indeed by this time if one is reading Swinnerton's study and has never opened any of Gissing's novels, one decides never to do so. Why read a man who is so obviously inferior, who began without ability and ended in frustration ? One has to have a strong faith in Gissing's genius to be able to read Swinnerton and have it survive. And finally to Gissing is not even left that saving quality of modesty, for " To him the eternal discouragement of living without distinction was paralyzing. " A more perceptive critic would have substituted for " distinction ", " recognition " — and realized that it meant not recognition of self but of the ideals which prompted his toil and of the works which were their fruit.

In the recent revised edition of his critical study Swinnerton omitted the following passage — an unnecessary caution since it is only in tone with the whole of this unfortunate chapter entitled " Biographical ". He said : " To write of Gissing is to write of one who failed. To point to his virtues, to the quality of his books is to realize how much one would like to point to other qualities which are not there. " This is the full flower of destructive criticism !

There has been woven about the figure of George Gissing a legend, the legend of poverty and frustration. He is painted as a pathetic artist, a great might-have-been. Concerning his poverty the truth is not so important ;[1] whether he was rich or poor, whether he starved or dined luxuriously, can have but little

1. Austin Harrison in his article " George Gissing, " *(Nineteenth Century)*, LX [1906], 453, has disproved the idea of Gissing's extreme poverty and the *Letters of George Gissing to His Family* go still further in refuting this delusion.

weight in a literary estimate. But " his frustration ", that is a fundamental point, which by its acceptance may make or mar his fame. This repute is not accidental — it is the direct result of much that has been written about him. Whether its manufacture was conscious or unconscious the result is the same, the real man, the great novelist is obscured in the sentimental haze which has gathered about him. He is one of the last writers who would care to have his appreciation come through pity and yet because of this legend that is frequently the case. Poor Gissing, he tried so hard ! What a shame that he never was a success !

There have been several important factors in the evolution of this legend. First of all there is Gissing's own tendency to self-depreciation ; the world and particularly our friends are reasonably inclined to take us at our own valuation. Then there were the tragic details of his life as they have been unsparingly revealed by Morley Roberts. And third we must emphasize the continual declamation of the critics, one and all, that Gissing's lifework was misdirected — he was an essayist and he wrote novels. This, of course, has obscured the real worth of his novels which have been consistently underrated. And finally there has been Swinnerton to develop to its fullest proportions the legend of Gissing's frustration, his failure as a writer. *Failure* is a very strong word to apply unconditionally to the author of *Born in Exile, New Grub Street* and *Eve's Ransom*, not to mention several other novels of character and brilliance. But the legend has grown ; it is fixed in men's minds ; it is impossible for them to view Gissing as distinct from it. Yet until that is done no sound appreciation of his novels will be forthcoming.

## *CHAPTER III*

## GISSING'S HISTORICAL POSITION AS A NOVELIST

The formative influences in the Victorian novel were of course those writers who developed its particular technique, its individual possibilities, to the most impressive proportions. Of these, there were three whose works stood as the classic models, the greatest examples of their art, in method if not in spirit, to the aspiring writers of the late nineteenth century. The three to whom I refer are Dickens, Thackeray and George Eliot. To attempt to characterize them briefly, and to make that characterization significant not only of them but of the dozens of lesser lights which shone in their reflection, is a complicated task and one needing the services of diplomacy as well as observation. You may say that what was true of Dickens, was not true of Thackeray, and that George Eliot contradicted them both. So when this short summary is given may the reader keep in mind that the author is speaking purely in generalities. If a book or a character occurs to the reader's mind which might not harmonize with the generalization stated, let the reader consider it as the exception which, haply, may prove the rule. With this reservation in mind the following may be considered an outline of the general method of the Victorian novelist.

The plot of the Victorian novel was an elaborate structure covering a number of years and involving several sets of characters, the affairs of which were intricately interlaced. The reader is frequently acquainted with the entire life history of a dozen people, beginning with their infancy and even their ancestry, and continuing until marriage or death brought them persumably to some unalloyed state. These people were of all different strata of society, the aristocracy, the various grades of the middle class, and the " common people ". Sometimes nearly all of these various strata

would be represented in one book and depicted with a cunning emphasis on the differences in their ways of living, their homes, their pleasures, their thoughts. Country and city received each its share of attention and a cross-section of the life of either might be represented. There were generally several centers of interest : an intrigue in the nobility, a love affair in the middle class, an impending tragedy in the servants' quarters. And the reader was carried from one center to another with all the ingenuity of the continued story. A panorama of happiness and sorrow, success and failure, birth and death, was sketched, and the light and dark tones blended until a harmonious and unified whole was represented on the canvas. This was the Victorians' art, the presentation of life in all its wide flung and differing phases.

The Victorians were afraid of realism ; that is, the realism which presents life as seen by the clear eye — a vision uncolored by sentiment or unsoftened by humor. Their delineation of character was subtle but limited by the restraint of polite society. To one Becky Sharp, there were a dozen Little Doras, sweet but insipid — the model girl of the period. The young men although under less stricture were firmly labeled as gentlemen or the reverse. Love was an elevating, revealing force — it affected them much in the Dantesque fashion and for a time they lost their British solidity and strayed into the realm of the lyric.

Beside plot and characters of a distinct type, the Victorian novelist used what might best be termed " descriptive machinery ". He did not suggest in a few words — the modern method — but rather planned his settings with all the care that his fair readers bestowed upon their fancy embroidery. Apparently no scene could exhaust the writer's fertile phraseology nor had any detail of fashionable or unfashionable life escaped his observation. Furthermore, at all times the author preserved a certain drawing-room decorum, pulling the shades and lighting the lamps at the correct moment — veiling unpleasant scenes with sentiment or humor. Whether the novels were written of high or low life, they directed their appeal to polite society.

The thesis of these books was largely moral ; the characters struggled with problems of right and wrong. More delicate sensibilities of temperament did not often find expression. People made mistakes, through weakness of character, and suffered for them — conscience was a strong chastising force. Today we want in each

novel a new plot, a new theme, and a new view of life. But the Victorians were satisfied with a plot which bore genteel resemblances to a dozen others ; an orthodox moral theme, because they still clung to the idea that literature should instruct man by pointing out the right and the wrong ; and the same view of life on every hand, because to them there was only one view.

The modern novelist has seen fit to change many of the features, both physical and spiritual, of the Victorian method. Now the plot is frequently very simple and derives more interest from the mental perturbations of the characters than from their actions. A whole chapter may be spent in futile conversation, or discussions of irrelevant incidents, simply to present a point of view, to reveal fully the complexity of these chosen individuals. No detail or emotional reaction is too indelicate for the author's use. There are fewer characters — only one set or two — and in all, perhaps, a half dozen persons in place of the Victorian twenty odd. This is a natural development, for the novel is now settled in its one volume form, and there is neither space nor opportunity for an author to do justice to more than a few characters while pursuing the exhaustive psychoanalytic method. Furthermore, the modern novelist has dethroned woman. As a character, as an individual, she is now studied with complete frankness. Dianas and Tesses have been discovered. And taking a leaf from Jane Austen, the workings of the feminine mind have disclosed an unsuspected world of wit and wisdom. As a result, love has suffered a new type of treatment — the classic restraint so long respected has been overcome, and love is dissected, graded, analyzed with all the trickery of modern pseudo-science.

With the central interest lodged in the portrayal of character the modern novel is concerned with circumstance only to the degree in which it restricts character. We are not interested in the plot for its own sake, or in the city or country background for its charming wordpictures, but instead we see these two elements — plot and background — working as the force of circumstance which has the power to make the characters happy or sad, to incite them to revolt or to lull them into submission. Therefore it develops that the primary importance of plot and background has lessened ; they are no longer ends in themselves, but only a means to the end — the revelation of character. In summary, we may say, that the modern novel is a free and exhaustive study of a few

characters with attending circumstance to be stressed only as it influences and shapes character.

George Gissing looked upon Dickens, Thackeray and George Eliot as the accepted models in novel writing. While he deplored their lack of that realism which he found in French and Russian literature, yet the outline of their novel building, the involved and lengthy plot, the multitude of characters, and the wide descriptive background, were to him a part of the gospel of fiction. He wrote all of his novels following the Victorian method, except one, *Eve's Ransom*. However, from the time of that publication, that is after 1895, we find that he was writing novels of only one volume and showing a greater concentration of interest.[1] In the early novels, for example, *Demos* and *Isabel Clarendon*, Gissing drew plots of Herculean proportions. In *Demos* there are no less than five sets of characters : The Eldons, aristocracy ; the Walthams, upper middle class ; the Westlakes, of the same class but with an intellectual turn of mind ; and the Mutimers and the Vines who are both of the common people. Not a short section but almost the entire life of these various families is presented.

In *Isabel Clarendon* the attention of the reader finds numerous centers of interest : there are Isabel, Kingcote and Ada Warren — each an exhaustive and monumental study ; then there is the rector's family, Mr. Vissian, his wife and little son ; the Meres family, an early example of the type of the struggling author and his people, of which Gissing was later to make an epic study in *New Grub Street* ; the healthy British Strattons who are not bothered by unnecessary thought ; the Jallands, a pitiful portraiture of a poverty stricken family ; and the remarkably clever Mrs. Bruce Page and her society group. Add to these, three men of no attach-

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1. In a letter to his brother, Gissing speaks of this change in literary method and shows himself to be in sympathy with the new developments. " It is fine to see how the old three volume tradition is being broken through. One volume is becoming commonest of all. It is the new school, due to continental influence. Thackeray and Dickens wrote at enormous length, and with a profusion of detail ; their plan is to tell everything, and leave nothing to be divined. Far more artistic, I think, is the later method, of merely suggesting ; of dealing with episodes, instead of writing biographies. The old novelist is omniscient ; I think it is better to tell a story precisely as one does in real life, hinting, surmising, telling in detail what *can* so be told and no more. In fact, it approximates to the dramatic mode of presentment. " *(Letters of George Gissing to His Family*, p. 166).

ment ; Vincent Lacour, Robert Asquith and Lord Winterset, the latter two, suitors to Isabel. One need hardly comment that here is spread a wide canvas with each group, each character, unmistakable in its individuality, not only in modes of life but in thought as well. It is the Victorian method used by a writer of fertile creative powers, reproducing not unworthily the broad lines and detailed minutiae of *Middlemarch* or *Bleak House.*

In the same general method Gissing wrote *Thyrza* (1887), *A Life's Morning* (1888), *The Nether World* (1889), *The Emancipated* (1890), *New Grub Street*[1] (1891), *Denzil Quarrier* (1892), *Born in Exile* (1892), *The Odd Women* (1893), and *In the Year of Jubilee* (1894). Then came three short works *Eve's Ransom* (1895), *The Paying Guest* (1895), and *Sleeping Fires* (1895), the latter two being novelettes. After these — *The Whirlpool* (1897), which although published in only one volume, reverts nevertheless to the old broad proportions ; then *The Town Traveller* (1898), a short and unpretentious work in which Gissing tries to see " The nether world " through rose colored glasses ; and *The Crown of Life* (1898) which employs a crowded stage but exhibits a general waning of the author's power. Then again we find large scope, a flock of characters, and a plot of marvellous convolutions in *Our Friend the Charlatan* (1901). *Will Warburton* (1905), a pleasant novel of moderate plot interest, while not published until later, must have been written in the period between 1901 and 1903, because we know that at the time of his death in 1903, Gissing was engaged in working upon the ponderous historical novel entitled *Veranilda.*

So we see that as far as method was concerned, Gissing throughout his life clung for the most part to the Victorian ideal.[2] Even

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1. Of this Swinnerton says, " On the other hand, *New Grub Street* almost presents the air of a microcosm. If the chapters did not so mechanically switch the interest unprogressively from one set of characters to another, we should be convinced and delighted. As it is, *New Grub Street* is nearly as arbitrary as *Martin Chuzzlewit.* The method is the method of Dickens, and as the entertainment provided is less superhuman we are made to feel the machinery. " (Frank Swinnerton, *George Gissing, a Critical Study,* p. 170).

2. Swinnerton writes. " But he was still hampered by their methods. In the longer works of the Victorians, continuity was sacrificed to variety of interest, with the result that the art of construction was unknown except in the short works or in those where " plot " was important. Gissing despised " plot " ; he had the instinct of the true artist in relation to probability and consistency. At the same time, while he built several elaborate structures — none more so than *Demos*

among his later novels it is only *Eve's Ransom*, with its four characters and its purely psychological interest, which was written free of the Victorian method. It is therefore only in the more subtle manifestations of Gissing's art that we may perceive the prevalence of modern thought. Briefly, it may be found in his character portrayals of young men and women on the brink of life, in his viewpoint on love and marriage, and in his predilections in the theory of the writing of the novel.

Gissing presented a new type of young man — a visionary person whose reflective nature led him to a morbid doubt of self. This young man has none of the qualities of the " go-getter " — the energetic person who makes a success in the competitive world and enjoys the struggle which life presents to him. Instead the Gissing man sees business only as a bondage, killing his impulses, his chance to live ! What he would do with his leisure except read and walk about the country side is never disclosed. Leisure seems to be an end in itself — and the denial of it life's cruelest frustration. His ambition is centered in self-culture which in a vague way serves as the aim of existence. Love is more distressing than pleasurable ; it opens new avenues for vacillation and morose analysis. Godwin Peak in *Born in Exile* and Maurice Hilliard in *Eve's Ransom* are essentially modern heroes because in both the unheroic predominates.

Gissing showed thought that was still more modern in his dethronement of women. From the very first Gissing understood that men and women should be presented impartially in fiction, but his youth influenced him to write some warmly sentimental passages (see *Demos, Isabel Clarendon, Thyrza* and *A Life's Morning)* which are the most evident flaws in his otherwise admirable conservatism. This sentimentalism concerning women was partly an inheritance from the Victorians and partly due to the influence of Meredith, whose " beautiful words " Gissing valued highly.

It is questionable whether Meredith's influence upon Gissing was a healthy one. In spite of their contemporaneity they were writers of entirely different methods and aims. Meredith leaned toward the artificial and the fashionable — he writes of society in the established tradition. Gissing instead wrote for the most

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or *The Whirlpool* — he was Victorian in his notions of construction. " (Frank Swinnerton, *George Gissing, a Critical Study*, pp. 168-9).

part of the unfashionable — his aim being a new art, a realism in the portrayal of mediocrity and of the wretched poor. He desired to portray these without humor and without sentiment, the two elements which previously had made the unpalatable truth palatable to English readers. Gissing's aspirations were singularly his own ; he has said,

> " With me it is a constant aim to bring the present and the past near to each other, to remove the distance which seems to separate Hellas from Lambeth. " [1]

The works of George Gissing which may be said to show Meredith's influence are *Isabel Clarendon, A Life's Morning* and short passages in other novels, notably *Demos* and *Thyrza.* Unfortunately this influence is most noticeable in a forced sentimentality regarding young people of culture and charm — for want of a better definition it might be referred to as " the drawing room flavor ". Meredith was the reader at Chapman & Hall's at the time that they accepted *The Unclassed* and *Isabel Clarendon* and assisted in the cutting down of the latter book from three to two volumes.

Gissing was at first appalled by the complexity of Meredith's style. He wrote in 1884, " His (Meredith's) own novels are of a superlatively tough species (almost matching Harbottle chops) " ; [2] but only a year later he was exclaiming,

> " By hook or crook get hold of *Diana of the Crossways.* The book is right glorious. Shakespeare in modern English ; but, mind you, to be read twice, if need be, thrice. There is a preface, which is a plea for philosophic fiction, an admirable piece of writing, the English alone rendering it worthy of the carefullest pondering. More ' brain stuff ' in the book, than many I have read for long. " [3]

*Diana* was in Gissing's mind at the time that he was writing *Isabel Clarendon* and in Isabel's lovers may be found a coterie similar to that which surrounded Diana. However, there is no great resemblance between the two books except that both deal with charming women who have earned their security in life through loveless marriages. Although a beauty and intelligent, Isabel has none of Diana's wit and dash. Gissing at this youthful period

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1. *Letters of George Gissing to His Family,* p. 184.
2. *Ibid.,* p. 138.
3. *Ibid.,* p. 156.

was too much a worshipper at the shrine of womanhood to see her with a sufficiently humorous eye.

*A Life's Morning* was written directly after *Isabel Clarendon*, although not published until 1888.[1] This is the book in which Meredith's influence was noted by Thomas Seccombe. The hero and heroine, Wilfred Athel and Emily Hood, and the attending characters, Mr. Athel, Mrs. Rossall and Beatrice Redwing, are decidedly Meredithian in flavor. So, too, is the plot with its interest centered in the course of true but restrained love. The amusing point about this novel is that it evidently did not receive Meredith's approval, for in 1885 after Gissing had completed it he wrote to his brother, " Meredith tells me I am making a great mistake in leaving the low-life scenes ; says I might take a foremost place in fiction if I pursued that. "[2] In accordance with this advice Gissing next wrote *Demos* and followed it with *Thyrza*. He never again returned to the type of fashionable novel which he had attempted to write in *Isabel Clarendon* and *A Life's Morning* ; *Isabel Clarendon*, however, is undoubtedly one of the best of all of his novels.

Gissing never completely lost his idealism where women were concerned, but as the novelist matured, one notes particularly in the minor characters a bitter perception as to feminine weakness, and Gissing shows a general disgust for the conditions of life which fostered feminine ignorance and incapability. Both Meredith and Gissing in spite of their different points of view arrived at their dethronement of women through the same method — irony. Gissing however is more unpleasant and less humorous. It is in *The Odd Women*, a cruel but zealous study of the feminine situation in the 'nineties, that Gissing expressed his most clear-sighted views concerning women. This book contains the forceful exposition of one of Gissing's favorite grievances — the ambiguity of woman's position in the working world, a subject which at that time (about 1894) was not receiving the serious attention it has attracted in the twentieth century. Gissing was a pioneer in his views on the education and emancipation of women. He saw that the perfect fulfillment of self in a happy marriage was the lot of only a few. What of the others, the " odd women " ? A world

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1. A fact surmised by Thomas Seccombe and later proven in the *Letters of George Gissing to His Family*.
2. *Letters of George Gissing to His Family*, p. 172.

originally planned on purely biological lines had conceived no useful alternative for them. Gissing with a wisdom far beyond the average of his time saw education and the opportunities for a pleasant and worth while financial independence as the only solution. That the world has accepted his views becomes every day more apparent to the observer.

But education was as much needed for the married as the unmarried woman. On this point Gissing is very bitter indeed. He writes in such decided words as these : " The vast majority of men must make a marriage that is doomed to be a dismal failure. " *(The Odd Women)*. " Nowadays he saw the matter in a light of fuller experience. In his rank of life (the lower middle class) married unhappiness was a sure thing, and the faults could generally be traced to wives who had no sense of responsibility, no understanding of household duties, no love of simple pleasures, no religion. " *(In the Year of Jubilee)*. All through his novels is the recurrent cry for the improvement of women —" Men have kept women at a barbarous stage of development, and then complained that they are barbarous. In the same way society does its best to create a criminal class and then rages against the criminal. " *(The Odd Women)*. And yet, as an example of the flexibility of his mind, Gissing was able to write ironically even of that which he most desired. In *In the Year of Jubilee* he describes Jessica Morgan, a young woman who is devoted to education :

" She talked only of the ' exam ', of her chances in this or that ' paper ', of the likelihood that this or the other question would be ' set '. Her brain was becoming a mere receptacle for dates and definitions, vocabularies and rules syntactic, for thrice-boiled essence of history, ragged scraps of science, quotations at fifth hand, and all the heterogeneous rubbish of a ' crammer's shop '. When away from her books, she carried scraps of paper, with jottings to be committed to memory. Beside her plate at meals lay formulae and tabulations She went to bed with a manual and got up with a compendium. "

In woman's sentimental and unenlightened views on love and the marriage relations, Gissing finds inexhaustible material for vituperation, as in this passage in *The Odd Women* : —

" If every novelist could be strangled and thrown into the sea we should have some chance of reforming women. The girl's nature was corrupted with sentimentality, like that of all but every woman who is intelligent enough to read what is called the best fiction, but not intelligent enough to understand its vice. Love — Love — Love ; a

sickening sameness of vulgarity. What is more vulgar than the ideal of novelists ? They won't represent the actual world ; it would be too dull for their readers. In real life, how many men and women *fall in love* ? Not one in every ten thousand I am convinced. Not one married pair in ten thousand have felt for each other as two or three couples do in every novel. There is the sexual instinct, of course, but that is quite a different thing ; the novelist daren't talk about that. The paltry creatures daren't tell the one truth that would be profitable. The result is that women imagine themselves noble and glorious when they are most near the animals. "

In agreement with the more vital of the Victorians, Gissing did not hold to the flower-scented views of love and marriage — that benevolent tone closely related to the album and the gift book. In one of his later novels, *The Crown of Life*, Gissing included this statement which fully expresses his point of view : —

" When I say love, I mean Love — not domestic affection. Marriage is the practical concern of mankind at large ; Love is the personal experience of the very few. You can no more choose to be a lover than to be a poet. "

This is of course a distinction widely accepted in the modern novel.

Third, we turn to Gissing's ideals and predilections in the theory of novel writing. In *New Grub Street*, and in a smaller way elsewhere, Gissing portrayed a new class of people — the striving writers — the lower circle of the literary world. It was not the Victorian style to write of failures — previous to this a literary man had simply meant a successful writer. Now in the presenting of this new class of people, Gissing achieved his greatest artistic triumph, for he not only knew but felt what he wrote.[1] In *New Grub Street* there is a poverty-stricken but brilliant novelist, Harold Biffin, who stands out as a significant figure, because in his literary endeavors he conceived the doctrine of the " ignobly decent ". In this idea as presented by Gissing (via Biffin) we find the seed, the first spark of life from which was later to come one of the most fruitful conceptions of the artistic purpose in modern fiction. The passage in which he explains his theory is potent with

1. Gissing notes in his diary : " Lee told me of an oldish literary hack, who one day came to him in great discouragement, and said he should abandon literature. It turned out that he had been reading *New Grub Street*. (*Letters of George Gissing to His Family*, p. 352).

original thought — it also shows Gissing's clarity of viewpoint in regard to his predecessors.

" I have thought of a new way of putting it. What I really aim at is an absolute realism in the sphere of the ignobly decent. The field, as I understand it, is a new one ; I don't know any writer who has treated ordinary vulgar life with fidelity and seriousness. Zola writes deliberate tragedies ; his vilest figures become heroic from the place they will fill in a strongly imagined drama. I want to deal with the essentially unheroic, with the day-to-day life of that vast majority of people who are at the mercy of paltry circumstance. Dickens understood the possibility of such work, but his tendency to melodrama on the one hand, and his humor on the other, prevented him from thinking of it. An instance, now. As I came along by Regent's Park half an hour ago a man and a girl were walking close in front of me, love-making ; I passed them slowly and heard a good deal of their talk — it was part of the situation that they should pay no heed to a stranger's proximity. Now, such a love-scene as that has absolutely never been written down ; it was entirely innocent, yet vulgar to the Nth power. Dickens would have made it ludicrous — a gross injustice. Other men who deal with low-class life would perhaps have preferred idealizing it — an absurdity. For my own part, I am going to reproduce it verbatim, without one single impertinent suggestion of any point of view save that of honest reporting. The result would be something unutterably tedious. Precisely. That is the stamp of the ignobly decent life. If it were anything *but* tedious it would be untrue. I speak, of course, of its effect upon the ordinary reader. "

Now in certain of Gissing's novels, notably *The Unclassed, The Nether World, The Odd Women, New Grub Street, In the Year of Jubilee* and in a lesser way in *Thyrza* (the chief character of which, however, is purely a romantic creation), *Demos* and *The Town Traveler*, Gissing attempted to live up to his doctrine — his new ideal of the novelist's art, that is, that the author should present ordinary life " with fidelity and seriousness ". However, even the casual reader cannot but perceive that there was some force, some influence, which drew Gissing away from the continual pursuit of this ideal. Gissing's theory of art was defeated through a predilection in his nature which worked in opposition to the practice of his theory. It is in a sentence just beyond the passage quoted above that Gissing gives himself away. Reardon (whom all the critics claim to be " a portrait of the author ") tells Biffin that he could not write novels of the " ignobly decent ". And Biffin replies, " Certainly you could'nt. You—well, you are a psychological realist in the sphere of culture. You are impatient of vulgar

circumstances." These two passages illuminate Gissing's dual character as a novelist. He had two warring motives in his novel writing; the one to present the "ignobly decent... with fidelity and seriousness", and the other to study life as "a psychological realist in the sphere of culture" and as such to be impatient of "vulgar circumstances" — which are after all the material of the "ignobly decent".[1]

Gissing had little patience with the demands of ordinary life. He saw the living quarters of the poor, the dark, dirty, unaired corners of Clerkenwell, as places of habitation unfit for human kind. The necessity of making a living — the whip at the back — which took what little strength these ill-nourished people could muster — was not in his eyes the plan of a wise fate. Even more pitiful did he find these poor people in their attempts at play and enjoyment on a Bank Holiday. His heart ached with compassion at the sight of the vulgar spectacle presented.

"So at length came Monday, the first Monday in August, a day gravely set apart for the repose and recreation of multitudes who neither know how to rest nor how to refresh themselves with pastime. To-day will the slaves of industrialism don the *pileus*. It is high summer tide. With joy does the awakening publican look forth upon the blue-misty heavens, and address his adorations to the Sun-god, inspirer of thirst. Throw wide the doors of the temple of Alcohol! Behold, we come in our thousands, jingling the coins that shall purchase us this one day of tragical mirth. Before us is the dark and dreary autumn; it is a far cry to the foggy joys of Christmas. Io Saturnalia!.....

"Hours yet before the fire works begin. Never mind; here by good luck we find seats where we can watch the throng passing and repassing. It is a great review of the People. On the whole how respectable they are, how sober, how deadly dull! See how worn-out the poor girls are becoming, how they gape, what listless eyes most of them have! The stoop in the shoulders so universal among them merely means over-toil in the workroom. Not one in a thousand shows the

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1. Swinnerton, *George Gissing, a Critical Study*, p. 50. "Also, in spite of the fact that Gissing is vaguely labelled a realist by those who suppose realism to connote everything dismal, it is among the studies of abnormal temperament that his most notable successes are to be found. In the books about the workers there is an absence of exact knowledge, due to his own temperamental lack of sympathy with the life he is describing; and in the few stories which touch the class named by one of his characters the 'ignobly decent' ('the essentially unheroic... that vast majority of people who are at the mercy of paltry circumstance') only one — *The Odd Women* — has any claim to rank with his best books."

elements of taste in dress ; vulgarity and worse glares in all but every costume. Observe the middle-aged women ; it would be small surprise that their good looks had vanished, but whence comes it they are animal, repulsive, absolutely vicious in ugliness ? Mark the men in their turn : four in every six have visages so deformed by ill-health that they excite disgust ; their hair is cut down to within half an inch of the scalp ; their legs are twisted out of shape by evil conditions of life from birth upwards. Whenever a youth and a girl come along arm-in-arm, how flagrantly shows the man's coarseness ! They are pretty, so many of these girls, delicate of feature, graceful did but their slavery allow them natural development ; and the heart sinks as one sees them side by side with the men who are to be their husbands.

One of the livelier groups is surging hitherwards ; here we have frolic, here we have humour. The young man who leads them has been going about all day with the lining of his hat turned down over his forehead ; for the thousandth time those girls are screaming with laughter at the sight of him. Ha, ha ! He has slipped and fallen upon the floor, and makes an obstruction ; his companions treat him like a horse that is ' down ' in the street. ' Look out for his ' eels ! ' cries one ; and another, ' Sit on his ' ed ! ' If this doesn't come to an end we shall die of laughter. Lo ! one of the funniest of the party is wearing a gigantic cardboard nose and flame coloured whiskers. There, the stumbler is on his feet again. " Ere he comes up smilin ' ! ' cries his friend of the cardboard nose, and we shake our diaphragms with mirth. One of the party is an unusually tall man. ' When are you comin ' down to have a look at us ? ' cries a pert lass as she skips by him.

" A great review of the People. Since man came into being did the world ever exhibit a sadder spectacle ? "

*(The Nether World).*

Here indeed is the " essentially unheroic " — such subject matter as Biffin would have chosen. But what of its manner of presentation ? Biffin said, " I am going to reproduce it verbatim, without a single impertinent suggestion of any point of view save that of honest reporting. " Gissing was able to write clearly of vulgar circumstances, to reproduce ordinary life with accuracy, but he could not keep hidden his indignant impatience, the rising tide of his disgust. " Honest reporting " became an impossibility because Gissing could not subject his own personality — could not attain the unemotional, unprejudiced vision of the absolute realist.

Swinnerton in his critical study made a correct conclusion when he said that Gissing was a greater artist in his studies of temperament than in his portrayals of the " ignobly decent ". The critic, however, mistook the cause for this when he suggest-

ed that Gissing's "temperamental lack of sympathy with the life he is describing" defeated his best purposes in the presentation of that life. Gissing was misled not by too little sympathy but by too much — if he had perceived and written with less emotion, less of the white heat of intolerance, his portrayals of the restrictions of vulgar life would have been clearer — better balanced — although undoubtedly they would have lost much of their impelling force. Gissing had a remarkable genius for perception — how many writers can present as adequately the various elements in a holiday crowd? — but in the writing he was led to dramatize his figures, to infuse into the situations an emotional quality which was perhaps beyond their actual possibilities, because he felt their tragic aspects too strongly for mere presentation — Biffin's honest reporting.

Furthermore Gissing did not curtail the expression of his own opinions — his point of view was never left in doubt. "Well, as every one must needs have his panacea for the ills of society, let me inform you of mine," he said in *The Nether World* — and for the space of a paragraph he calmly abdicates the rôle of novelist and becomes the essayist *pro tempore*. This practice of Gissing's of intruding himself where he has no right, of unnecessarily destroying the illusion of his fictional structure, has sent the shivers down the spine of every critic who has ever turned his pages. It is a breach of the etiquette of novel writing — and the critic, with his little book of rules firmly in hand, shakes his head and puts a black mark beside the name of Gissing. But there must be some explanation in this case, for Gissing was an artist and a man of brilliant scholarship and could not have made such a breach — and one in direct contradiction to his own theories of novel writing — unless he had felt that it was made legitimate by some previous usage. In reading Dickens (and one must always remember that Dickens was Gissing's first master) one infrequently finds a passage where the author has stepped before the curtain and directly addresses his audience. I am reminded of a chapter in *Bleak House* where Dickens describes the workings of the Chancery Court and as his indignation rises he casts aside the rôle of novelist and speaks directly to his readers. The transition is more artistically handled by Dickens than by Gissing; but one cannot doubt that it is here that Gissing found his justification for his breach of literary

taste — his confidential mannerisms which have been so extensively criticized. Also this explanation serves as a further example of Gissing's development as a transitional novelist of the late Victorian times.

Gissing's portrayal of the " ignobly decent " was partly frustrated by his impatience with vulgar circumstances which led him to write from the personal rather than the more desirable impersonal point of view. In addition his social intolerance incited him to express his own opinions — thus spoiling the artistic ideal of pure objectiveness. Gissing's theory as to the writing of the novel, the theory of " absolute realism in the sphere of the ignobly decent ", was an original conception and one admitting of great possibilities, but his emotional, impatient and sympathetic nature, combined with the influence of his Victorian predecessors, defeated the best exercise of his beliefs.

The second factor, that is Gissing's position as a " psychological realist in the sphere of culture ", may be clearly seen even in such an early work as *Isabel Clarendon*. This novel is the realistic study of the course of the mutual love of Isabel Clarendon and Bernard Kingcote — two people of widely different thought and modes of life. The characterization of Bernard Kingcote as a tragic figure of nervous incapability and sensitive frustration has no parallel in Victorian fiction.[1] His limitations as a man (which resulted in the disastrous ending of his love affair) lay not in circumstance but entirely within himself — a situation which Gissing succeeds in making wholly plausible. A second novel, and one of later production but no less psychological interest, is *Born in Exile*. Godwin Peak's strivings in " the sphere of culture " constitute a novel which is entirely modern both in motivation and in thought. Peak's ambitions (in which we are told may be found all the unhappy desires of the author's own youth) finally resolve themselves into the determination to marry a woman of refinement and one whose breeding had been that of a class superior to his own. This union, he feels, would be the epitome of all his vague cultural aspirations — a strange idea but not unintelligible when one understands the fastidiousness and delicacy of Peak's nature.

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1. I am indebted to Lieutenant W. T. Young for this suggestion. *Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. XIII, ch. 14.

Godwin Peak's background, his humble home and family, his wretched life among the poor in London — these are presented in accordance with the doctrine of the " ignobly decent ", but the major interest of the book does not lie in this ; instead it is found in the study of the sensitive and unhappy temperament of the hero.

Each of these two phases in Gissing's writing, the one, the doctrine of the " ignobly decent ", the other, psychological realism in the sphere of culture, is original with him and distinctly modern in conception. They disclose him as being at heart a modern thinker, and one who did not only follow but looked forward. Contemporary fiction (by which I mean the fiction written within the last quarter century) teems with studies of ordinary life presented " with fidelity and seriousness ", and the characters are people " who are at the mercy of paltry circumstances ".[1] Still another current in contemporary fiction is the interest in psychological realism — " the free and exhaustive study of a few characters ".[2] Gissing may have masqueraded in a voluminous Victorian cloak but the man beneath was more original and vital than his disguise led one to suspect.

The position of Gissing as a transitionalist has been suggested but never fully developed by his critics. Seccombe introduced the transitional idea, stressing Gissing's Victorian legacy and the debt to Meredith, but naturally (as the critic was writing in 1906) he could not look ahead and emphasize also the equally important modern aspect. Swinnerton although writing later, added nothing new to Seccombe's conclusions ; he nowhere in his critical study showed much interest in the historical position of Gissing and gave the matter but casual comment, the salient points of which have been quoted in footnotes. Lieutenant Young in his article in the *Cambridge History of English Literature* gives an admirable paragraph to the discussion of Gissing as a transitionalist ; he makes the valuable suggestion that Gissing's modern tendencies (in the presentation of a " fami-

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1. Consider the novels of Arnold Bennett, Beresford, W. L. George, J. B. Priestley, Swinnerton, H. G. Wells (particularly *Love and Mr. Lewisham)* and the work of Sinclair Lewis, not to mention many others.

2. The examples are too numerous to mention ; Beresford and Swinnerton are outstanding.

liar 'slice of life' " and " in the analysis of the inner world of thought and feeling ") may have been the result largely of the influence of continental literature in which he was well versed, and in which the transition from idealism to realism took place at an earlier period than in English fiction. No critic, however, has given sufficient analysis to Gissing's dual character as a Victorian and as a modern novelist. Nor has any writer sought to unfold the various aspects of his influence in such a way as to establish for him his rightful importance in the history of the development of the English novel. And yet Gissing is an author who actually embodies in his works one of the most interesting phases in the whole history of fiction — the transition from the Victorian to the modern method and style, the stepping stone from Dickens, Thackeray and George Eliot to Bennett, Beresford, and even Swinnerton himself.

## *CHAPTER IV*

## GISSING AS A PORTRAYER OF SOCIETY

The last twenty-five years of the nineteenth century were restless with a dozen theories of new thought, new science and new religion. All the accepted doctrines of Christianity, democracy and art, by which previously the Englishman had been content to mould his life and his philosophy, were shaken to their depths by impudent and fearless doubt. Huxley and Harrison struck at the orthodox theology of the Church of England. Carlyle and Arnold expressed a strong distrust of the workings of democracy. Ruskin with the practical aid of William Morris strove to inculcate new theories of art based on original observation rather than ancient prejudice. Arnold and Ruskin with pedantic assurance attempted to teach the average citizen plus his commonplace family how to fly to the heights of culture. It was an age of the spreading of wings — for the individual, education ; for the nation, imperialism.

George Gissing was keenly aware of the activities of his age. In his novels we find frequent references to the life of that period, the new interest in education, the new theories of art, the changes in living conditions, the unions, the wars and rumors of wars, the current philosophies, the coming writers, the plays just produced, the popular lecturers, the fashions in music. Furthermore his letters to his family bear constant reference to and comment upon passing events. It is quite evident that he read newspapers as well as books. This interest in people, resulting in keen observation and reflection on Gissing's part, made his characterizations the most powerful feature of his ability as a novelist, The socialist and the philosopher in reading Gissing's novels may find in his characterizations alone the social and phi-

losophic thought of a lifetime — the thought, incidentally, of a remarkably brilliant mind whose individuality of viewpoint gave an artistic piquancy to the tiresome details of life.

Although we cannot with any degree of certainty define limits to Gissing's faculty of observation (for in his letters to his family he frequently showed himself to be a gentle, home-loving man with a delightful sense of humor — in all, quite a contrast to the vehement novelist), yet we know that his power of artistic presentation took only certain forms. In portraying the very poor, such as are found in *The Nether World*, *Demos* and *Thyrza*, he was capable of viewing them only in the light of tragedy. This tragic point of view had two aspects which he used in alternating phases — the ironic and the pathetic. In any novel written of sad and unattractive circumstances, the effect is very depressing unless the tragedy is alleviated either by some comedy or by the inclusion of some incidents in the vein of "looking on the bright side of life" — a sort of sentimental sop to ease the way. Gissing's humor was completely ironic and therefore its leavening qualities were very slight. The brightening incidents he conscientiously avoided as inartistic. Swinnerton in one of his most successful and noteworthy books, *Young Felix*, has someone ask concerning his principal character, "How is Felix? Still triumphing from failure to failure?" This short remark is symbolic of the attitude of the book — a toying with the balance of the elements of life — an easiness of viewpoint of which Gissing was never capable. To Gissing tragedy was tragedy and there was no sense in playing with it and making it appear as comedy. Other writers might do that because they wanted to please their readers (or for the better purpose of expressing an innate optimism), but Gissing cared nothing about pleasing his readers so he wrote under only two masters, art and truth. Add to these dominant forces his lack of optimism, and the so-called "dreary quality" of his work is explained. Nearly all writers in describing the Crystal Palace on a Bank Holiday (note the passage quoted from the *Nether World* in Chapter III) would have made it a highly amusing and delightful scene, which exuded satisfaction with life, and was a crowning tribute to the general good nature of the English people, holiday bent. But would not this very presentation show a lack of sympathy and understanding on the part of the author? This is merely a ques-

tion for the purpose of piercing the indifference of the reader who says, " Oh Gissing — he's so depressing, I can't read him ". And then turns to dear Dickens " Because he pictures life so wonderfully ". But the person who does not care for Gissing is not apt to see the deep tragedy of Dickens — for underneath his pleasing style, Dickens was as much a tragedian as Gissing. However, some may feel that there was more skill in Dickens, because he was able to make unpalatable truths palatable.

Gissing, let me repeat, wrote of the tragedy of the very poor in two aspects, the pathetic, and the ironic — however, in the use of both he displayed remarkable powers of artistic presentation — he was a master of irony and of pathos. In dealing with the story in *Demos* of Mrs. Mutimer, who could not adjust herself to the rising fortunes of her family, and who with two servants or more in the house was only happy when she could sneak out into the kitchen and scour a pan or two, Gissing portrayed all the pathetic tragedy of the unchangeableness of caste. Mrs. Mutimer was a working man's wife, used to spending her life-energy in cleaning, washing, cooking, and managing her unruly family. When she was moved to a new house and her children expected her to sit all day in the parlor in a silk dress, her entire purpose in life was taken from her. Music, art, books, the theatre, had never featured in her existence — she could not turn to them now. Her tragedy consisted in that very change which most people would have considered a great stroke of good fortune. The pathos in men's lives was always apparent to Gissing — the danger lay in the fact that the continual striking of one chord of feeling lessened its effectiveness.

Gissing's irony developed many shadings — all the way from the lightly humorous to the coldly contemptuous. An example of the former is found in this short passage in *The Nether World*.

" In the social classification of the nether world — a subject which so eminently adapts itself to the sportive and gracefully picturesque mode of treatment — it will be convenient to distinguish broadly, and with reference to males alone, the two great sections of those who do, and those who do not, wear collars. Each of these orders would, it is obvious, offer much scope to an analyst delighting in subtle gradation."

Then there is the irony which has in it the quality of pathos — a blending of aspects — which is illustrated by another passage from the same book.

" An hour later noises of a familiar kind sounded beneath the window. A woman's voice was raised in the fury of mad drunkenness, and a man answered her with threats and blows. ' That's Mother, ' sobbed Pennyloaf. ' I knew she wouldn't get over today. She never did get over a Bank-holiday. '

" Mrs. Candy had taken the pledge when her husband consented to return and live with her. Unfortunately she did not at the same time transfer herself to a country where there are no beer-shops and no Bank-holidays. Short of such decisive change, what hope for her ? "

And finally there is the coldly contemptuous irony — more forceful but less subtle in effect. This particular passage is from *The Town Traveler.*

" There on the narrow seats with high wooden backs, as uncomfortable a sitting as could be desired, with food before him of worse quality and worse cooked than any but English-speaking mortals would endure, he always felt at home, and was pleasantly reminded of the days of his youth, when a supper of eggs and bacon at some such resort rewarded him for a long week's toil and pinching. Sweet to him were the rancid odors ; delightfully familiar the dirty knives, the twisted forks, the battered teaspoons ; not unwelcome the day's newspaper splashed with brown stains of coffee and spots of grease. He often lamented that this kind of establishment was growing rare, passing away with so many other features of old London. "

In the portrayal of the poor, Gissing was certainly the " mouthpiece of misery " — he made demands upon the sympathy and understanding of his reader which the average person was unable to meet. Those who peruse his stories of the trials and restrictions of poverty must not expect " a pleasant hour's reading " — but rather a highly artistic elucidation of the less attractive features of this widely varying life. Gissing's novels will become popular in proportion to the increasing education of the reading public — as more and more we look to the novel for art rather than for amusement.

It is a singular fact that many find Gissing's portrayals of the middle class even more disturbing than those which picture people in the throes of dire poverty. The reason for this is that in poverty there are two limitations, lack of means and cultivation ; but the middle class on the whole have only one limitation, that of the mind — the whole world of thought lies within their reach, have they but the power to grasp it. An ironic exposition of the mental limitation of the average man of the lower

middle class is repulsive to the general public. It recoils in self-defence. And yet we all know that the limitation of the mind is a deeper and more irrevocable tragedy than the limitation of the purse.

Gissing's characters of the middle class may be divided into two groups, those who were intellectual and those who were not. The latter were by far in the majority; in fact, Gissing generally has a hero who shows a spiritual resemblance with the author and perhaps a heroine of unusual qualities of mind and the remainder are people of ordinary kin. I do not mean to suggest by this classification that the characters within the divisions lack variety; they are as diverse as life itself. Neither do the people termed " mediocre " lack interest — it is the very simplicity of their minds which intrigues the reader's attention. Because of the Victorian method in which Gissing wrote, few novels of his can be said to be restricted to one class of society but there are some whose principal concern lies with the members of the middle class. A loose grouping of these would include *The Emancipated, New Grub Street, Born in Exile, Denzil Quarrier, The Odd Women, In the Year of Jubilee, The Paying Guest, Eve's Ransom, The Whirlpool, The Crown of Life, Our Friend the Charlatan,* and *Will Warburton. Isabel Clarendon* and *A Life's Morning,* showing the influence of the society novel, deal with a life above that of the middle class but not with the actual aristocracy. Gissing never came in contact with any Lords or Ladies and so fortunately he did not choose to portray them. As Swinnerton has intimated his characterizations in the upper classes were mostly those of people who had but recently left an inferior circle — not those who were " to the manner born ".[1]

As has been suggested there is in each of Gissing's novels — with but few exceptions — a certain small group of people to whom he is temperamentally akin — those who have certain qualities of intellect similar to his own. Among the men outstanding examples are the vigorous thinker Osmond Waymark *(The Unclassed),* the nervously incapable Bernard Kingcote *(Isabel Clarendon),* the strongly individual Ross Mallard *(The*

1. Lady Ogram *(Our Friend the Charlatan)* Lady Rewill *(Sleeping Fires)* and Lord Polperro *(The Town Traveler)* were all of inferior birth. In fact, Lord Winterset *(Isabel Clarendon)* is Gissing's only drawing of the real nobility that is both successful and convincing.

*Emancipated)*, the frustrate Reardon, the poverty-stricken but valiant Biffin, the ingenuous Whelpdale (all in *New Grub Street)*, the sensitive but aspiring Godwin Peak *(Born in Exile)*, the visionary Langley *(Sleeping Fires)*, the morose Maurice Hilliard *(Eve's Ransom)* and the mature philosopher Harvey Rolfe *(The Whirlpool)*. These men, Waymark, Kingcote, Mallard, Reardon, Biffin, Whelpdale, Peak, Langley, Hilliard and Rolfe, have each a strong and distinctly individual personality ; as a whole, however, they may be classed as the Gissing type because of their spiritual resemblance to their author. They are all thinkers — individualists with scholarly inclinations ; most of them have the urge to write ; none of them is successful in a worldly sense. For some reason which seems to be peculiar to their natures they are all unfortunate in love. Their matrimonial intentions are not based upon the desire for a home and children, a pleasant domestic life, but rather upon the strong need created by their unhappy temperaments for comforting companionship — someone to whom they can turn when they wish to put aside the haunting thought of self. Love is with them an inverted emotion, based on their own desire for further happiness. They are on the whole distinctly a modern type.

With these men of intelligence should be placed several portrayals of women who are superior to the average in character and in thought. As early as the writing of *The Unclassed* Gissing attained a characterization of singular strength in Ida Starr — she is vivid and highly emotional, a young woman who beset by every conceivable disadvantage finally wins her battle with life. Then we find in succession five romantic creations — women whom Gissing sought to endow with a lasting charm. First there is Isabel in *Isabel Clarendon,* the best portrayal of a woman of high society in all of his books — a lady, and one to whom the manner of life means much. In *Demos*, Gissing drew Adela Waltham, a mere girl compared to Isabel who when that novel *(Isabel Clarendon)* opens and the love affair begins is nearly forty — a daring thing ! Adela was ruled by her mother and when she finally came into the sovereignty of her own person it was too late to save herself from disaster. She is symbolic of the fate of a rare and lovely nature which is encompassed and finally ruined by family intrigue " for her good ". In *Thyrza* Gissing

attempted great things[1] — here is the Dickens quality at its best ; and here is the influence of Daudet in the drawing of a white flower against the darkness of the slums. Thyrza is a vision : in one of his letters Gissing said of her " Thyrza herself is one of the most beautiful dreams I ever had or shall have. I value the book really more than anything I have yet done. "[2] She is not a study — there is little attempt to explain or justify her ; an unfortunate habit noted in connection with other characterizations and which was the direct result of Gissing's all-enveloping sincerity. In the end Thyrza had to die just as Juliet had to die. Emily Hood *(A Life's Morning)* is a compromise between the visionary idealism of Thyrza and the psychological realism of life. *A Life's Morning* is considerably weakened by the necessity of explaining Emily — the obvious reasons for her actions and decisions are not sufficient — there are reasons within reasons, wheels within wheels. And then the absurdly happy ending, dictated by the publishers, makes unfortunately of this book — which has in separate parts many brilliant features — a complete failure.

In the succeeding novels as Gissing's power and aptitude developed we are amazed at the remarkable collection of women whom he presents. The men are interesting, excellent in many respects, but the women are remarkable ! Who but Meredith has drawn a galaxy of portraits equally as fine ! Even Swinnerton admits that here Gissing is master. In *The Emancipated* there is a portrait of a charming young woman, Cecily Doran,

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1. In a letter to his sister at the time of the book's conception he wrote thus :

" I am living at present in Lambeth, doing my best to get at the meaning of that strange world, so remote from our civilization. My book is practically still to begin, but I believe it will be my best yet. I have the strangest people and scenes floating in my mind. Tomorrow, a Bank Holiday, I must spend in the street ; there is always much matter to be picked up on such days. "

" Ah, but you will see the result. I have a book in my head which no one else can write, a book which will contain the very spirit of London working-class life. Little by little it has been growing ; it will be a stronger and profounder book than *Demos*... With me it is a constant aim to bring the present and the past near to each other, to remove the distance which seems to separate Hellas from Lambeth. It can be done, by grasping firmly enough the meanings of human nature. " *(Letters of George Gissing to His Family*, pp. 182, 183, and 184).

2. *Letters of George Gissing to His Family*, p. 189.

who has complete freedom of action — a rare thing for a woman of that period — and who is fired with all the current theories of intellectual emancipation. However, as captain of her fate she acts unwisely and marries offhand an amazing young philanderer, Reuban Elgar. Cecily bravely lives it out and becomes a more cautious woman but youth's fresh opportunity for happiness is lost to her forever.

Many of Gissing's women come into their happiness after the trial and disillusionment of a youthful choice. Isabel Clarendon had been miserably married before she met Kingcote and in the end she finds contentment as the wife of still another suitor. Adela Waltham *(Demos)* passes through her difficult marriage with Richard Mutimer and afterwards we are assured that she will find some peace in a second union with Herbert Eldon who, moreover, had been her first lover. Thyrza pledges herself to marry Gilbert Grail and them unfortunately meets Walter Egremont and conceives her tragic love for him. Emily Hood and Wilfred Athel *(A Life's Morning)*, a pair of romantic neurotics with whom it is difficult to sympathize, pass through an extraordinary amount of trouble and he even becomes engaged to another girl, the vivacious Beatrice Redwing, before their fate of perfect happiness together is achieved. In *The Nether World* Sidney Kirkwood and Jane Snowden — obviously meant for each other if such things are written in an author's heaven — never become married. Amy Reardon (in *New Grub Street)* after her husband's death finds happy contentment as the wife of the more successful and practical Jasper Milvain — however, this leaves Marion Yule, the real heroine of the book and the former *fiancée* of Milvain, to eke out a frustrate life as her father's literary assistant.

In *Born in Exile* — to continue this series of troubled careers — Sidwell Warricombe lacks the courage necessary to cast her former life behind her and travel to Europe as Peak's wife. When the book closes she is still of the opinion that her choice, while unromantic, was wise. Lillian, the frail, ethereal mistress of Denzil Quarrier, has had a former unfortunate marriage which makes her legal union with Quarrier impossible and this serves as the foundation for the tragedy of the story. A series of catastrophies in *The Odd Women* continually defeats whatever well-meaning impulses the fates may have had. Even the love story

of Rhoda Nunn and Everhard Barfoot after some very hopeful scenes collapses when fulfillment is in sight. Rhoda expects too much and Barfoot is mere man — a reversal of the situation in *Eve's Ransom* when Hilliard expects too much and Eve is mere woman. The heroine of *In the Year of Jubilee,* Nancy Lord, has all kinds of remarkable difficulties before she finally emerges as the happy and contented wife of Lionel Tarrant, although, if one considers the characters of both, this seems an impossible achievement. *Eve's Ransom* has for its only plot the story of an unsuccessful love affair, and Eve, the center of a conflagration, is in the midst of another affair when she meets Hilliard, and at the conclusion is seen as the charming wife of still another man. Was romance ever so contrary ? Finally in *The Whirlpool* Alma Frothingham — a creation to whom no critic has paid fitting tribute — takes a disillusioning continental trip before she agrees to marry Rolfe ; and then later as a married woman attempts to continue the strategy which the continent had taught her. For every one of these women the course of true love, or in fact of any love, did not run smooth. Gissing when considering women seems of the conviction that love is very seldom transforming and that those natures who were restless, selfish, and dissatisfied before marriage are not apt to undergo a complete renaissance on the wedding day.

I was speaking of Cecily Doran *(The Emancipated)* when I was led astray by the diverse misfortunes of these attractive heroines. In the same book there is Miriam Baske, a devoutly religious young woman who has had rather an unsavory past in a marriage made for money. Miriam finally finds herself — or perhaps she simply loses her former self — through the reading of Dante, and becomes so completely changed that in the end she is considered as a worthy mate for Ross Mallard. It is quite typical of Gissing that he should seek to explain the changes in Miriam's character as the result of her reading — he had absolute faith in the power of books. The transformation is not convincing because it is too complete. Mrs. Abbott, a minor character in *The Whirlpool,* also has a miraculous change of character so that the lady at the beginning and the lady at the end of the book hardly seem to be the same person. These were errors in Gissing's art — but they are minor and should be treated as such — small offences in the balance with his great achievements.

It would not be fair to omit from the study of Gissing's heroines those three most miserable sisters in *The Odd Women* The eldest, Alice, is simply a dreary, well-meaning spinster and the youngest, Monica, a mere doll of a girl, but the second sister, Virginia, has a failing which places her, strange to say, among the best and most individual of Gissing's creations. It is only to Virginia in *The Odd Women* and Mrs. Mutimer in *Demos* that Swinnerton pays unalloyed tribute as character studies of faultless excellence. Virginia, as the reader soon becomes aware, is addicted to secret tippling; however, she covers it well and not until age and misfortune have weakened her reserve does her family discover the explanation of many little household mysteries. Virginia is a lady to whom the suggestion of the corner saloon was highly repulsive and so she is driven to practice with a canny furtiveness the last habit of which one would have suspected her. As Swinnerton says, " Virginia Madden, when not quite herself, is great. "

I am inclined to think that in the restraint and artistic suggestiveness which Gissing showed in his drawing of the unforgettable Eve, we find the art which is the pure product of imaginative genius. Swinnerton has said, and justly, that in the writing of this book Gissing " reached a point of detachment never elsewhere attained ". Eve is a delight and a mystery — delightful because of her elusive charm which is veiled in suggestiveness, — mysterious because not once does the author allow us a glimpse of her mind, we know no more of her than does the bewitched Maurice Hilliard; and in the end he finds that he knew nothing. There is womanliness personified in Isabel Clarendon, the fresh graciousness of girlhood in Adela Waltham, the mystery of a spiritual beauty in Thyrza, the splendid strength of mind in Rhoda Nunn, all the treasures of refinement and culture which were Sidwell Warricombe's — but Eve, a mere working girl, superficially educated at best, lacking any of the advantages of family or a pleasant home background — Eve overshadows them all because she has some indefinable quality. One does not feel that Gissing created Eve but rather that she was a wistful shadow who passed with reluctance before his vision. He observed her as best he could, watching her as she moved quite without his control or by his design. She was never his creature, to twist and turn, to analyse with

superior judgment. She was a mysterious, independent self.

When one considers that there are, to make a loose estimate, something more than three hundred important characters in Gissing's twenty-two novels, one realizes that there must have been included many people of ordinary life — just people — who played their parts, and not insignificant ones, in his books. Gissing was not an author who neglected details : if a character was to be included he was important enough to be the object of the writer's careful study. He had a gift for portraying family groups and the pleasant intricacies of their interrelationship. In Gissing's letters to his brothers and sisters he showed clearly how dear and real to him were the ties of family life. He was always inquiring about his mother, asking one sister as to the health of another, suggesting some change or some plan which they all might enjoy. Even in the midst of his own greatest trials his thought in his letters was first of them. As a result of this loving trait in his nature he drew in some of his novels delightful pictures of happy family life. In *Isabel Clarendon* the rector, Mr. Vissian, his wife, and their fanciful little boy form a charming group with the shaded rectory, a venerable treasure house of books, as their center of existence. The mutual affection which brightens the humble and meager lives of Lydia and Thyrza Trent is as lovely a picture of sweetness and tenderness as Gissing ever drew. It is evidence of the novelist's fertile power that Lydia, in spite of the poetry and imaginative feeling which is showered on Thyrza, does not suffer in comparison but has an individuality of strength and of beauty which is all her own. In *Born in Exile* the Warricombes, father, mother, son and daughter, present as a whole the solid English family of the upper middle class ; in the father and son may be found all of the breadth and equally all of the limitations of an Englishman of their class — unquestioning allegiance to the orthodox theology of the Church of England, a belief in honor which allows no merciful understanding to sway its dictates, and a strict sense of the dignity of self and of all that comprised self, particularly one's family. Sidwell as the daughter of the house was more pliable only because women are less vehement than men. The most perfect picture of English home life is that of the Mortons in *The Whirlpool*. It is amusing to note that Gissing includes even here his love of the classics.

" The house had stood for a century and a half, and for eighty years had been inhabited by Mortons. Of its neighbors in the elm-bordered road, one or two were yet older ; all had reached the age of mellowness. ' *Sicut umbra praeterit dies* ' — so ran the motto of the dial set between porch and eaves ; to Harvey Rolfe the kindliest of all greetings, welcoming him to such tranquillity as he knew not how to find elsewhere..... His (Morton's) house was spacious, well-built, comfortable. The furniture, in great part, was the same his parents had used ; solid mahogany, not so beautiful as furniture may be made, but serviceable, if need be, for another fifty years. He had a library of several thousand volumes, slowly and prudently collected, representing a liberal interest in all travail of the mind, and a special taste for the things of classical antiquity. Basil Morton was no scholar in the modern sense, but might well have been described by the old phrase which links scholar with gentleman. He lived by trade, but trade did not affect his life. The day's work over, he turned, with no feeling of incongruity, to a page of Thucydides, of Tacitus, or to those less familiar authors who lighted his favorite wanderings through the ruins of the Roman Empire. "

In Mrs. Morton is pictured the ideal English mother :

" Mrs. Morton had the beauty of perfect health, of health mental and physical. To describe her face as homely was to pay it the highest compliment, for its smile was the true life of the home, that never failed. *Filia generosi*, daughter of a house that bred gentlewomen, though its ability to dower them had declined in these latter days, she conceived her duty as wife and mother after the old fashion, and was so fortunate as to find no obstacle in circumstance. She rose early ; she slept early ; and her day was full of manifold activity. Four children she had borne — the eldest a boy now in his twelfth year, the youngest a baby girl ; and it seemed to her no merit that in these little ones she saw the end and reason of her being. "

If we turn to quite another stratum of society this illuminatting passage in *Demos* stresses and explains Gissing's belief in the permanency of class distinction.

" It was the face of a man by birth and breeding altogether beneath her.

" Never had she understood that as now ; never had she conceived so forcibly the reason which made him and her husband and wife only in name. Suppose that apparent sleep of his to be the sleep of death ; he would pass from her consciousness like a shadow from a field, leaving no trace behind. Their life of union was a mockery, their married intimacy was an unnatural horror. He was not of her class, not of her world ; only by violent wrenching of the laws of nature had they come together. She had spent years in trying to convince herself that there were not such distinctions, that only an unworthy prejudice parted class from class. One moment of true insight was

worth more than all her theorizing on abstract principles. To be her equal this man must be born again, of other parents, in other conditions of life. ' I go back to London a mechanical engineer in search of employment. ' They were the truest words he had ever uttered ; they characterized him, classed him. "

In all of Gissing's novels he clung to this theory of the fixity of class. This vision of an irrevocable fate may partly justify his continual use of the pathetic note in his portrayals of the poorer classes. It is in the same book *(Demos)* that he says, " But we are interesting in proportion to our capacity for suffering, and dignity comes of misery nobly borne. " This statement of an artistic precept in which we may believe that the author had the utmost faith is very illuminating when one considers the type of novel which Gissing wrote — he was, on the whole, much more concerned with unhappiness than with happiness.

But it is a mistake to think that when Gissing leaves the poorer classes he loses his keen perceptive power. For instance, consider Mr. Musselwhite in *The Emancipated* : " This gentleman suffered under a truly aristocratic affliction — the ever-reviving difficulty of passing his day. " Or again there is Madeline Denyer *(The Emancipated)* who as " a creation in a paragraph " equals Jessica Morgan *(In the Year of Jubilee).*

" Madeline — whom her sisters addressed affectionately as ' Mad ' — professed a wider intellectual scope ; less given to the melting mood than Barbara, less naïve in her enthusiasms, she took for her province aesthetic criticism in its totality, and shone rather in censure than in laudation. French she read passably ; German she had talked so much of studying that it was her belief she had acquired it ; Greek and Latin were beyond her scope, but from modern essayists who wrote in the flamboyant style she had gathered enough knowledge of these literatures to be able to discourse of them with a very fluent inaccuracy. With all schools of painting she was, of course, quite familiar ; the great masters — vulgarly so known — interested her but moderately, and to praise them was, in her eyes, to incur a suspicion of philistinism. From her preceptors in this sphere, she had learnt certain names, old and new, which stood for more exquisite virtues, and the frequent mention of them with a happy vagueness made her conversation very impressive to the generality of people. The same in music. It goes without saying that Madeline was an indifferentist in politics and on social questions ; at the introductions of such topics, she smiled. "

In fact it is always in regard to women that Gissing has his clearest vision — again and again, he writes of them in words

of such convincing truth that one wonders that even the austerity of his style has been able to keep him from acquiring that most lucrative of attainments, a feminine following. Mallard in *The Emancipated* is talking to his wife, the reclaimed Miriam, concerning Cecily whose husband has left her :

> " Well, well ; go and talk to the poor girl, and see if you can do anything. I wish she were an artist of whatever kind ; then it wouldn't matter much. A woman who sings, or plays, or writes, or paints, can live a free life. But a woman who is nothing but a woman, what the deuce is to become of her in this position ? "

What other English writer in 1890 was stating the truth concerning women with equal perception and clarity ?

There are two types of men beside the intellectual which Gissing pictured with rare ability ; one is the brusque outdoor British gentleman (those in this group Morley Roberts suggests are largely pictures of himself), and the other, the clever charlatan. The former may be found in its fullest development in the figure of Denzil Quarrier, a man who has all the obvious characteristics of healthy and temperate masculinity. Others of his kind are Alfred Waltham in *Demos*, Hugh Carnaby in *The Whirlpool*, Robert Narramore in *Eve's Ransom* (an admirable study, particularly in his subjection to Eve) and, but of a more crude variety, Mr. Gammon in *The Town Traveler*. They are kind at heart, apt to be indulgent regarding the weaker sex — with emphasis on the comparative connotation of the adjective — and in their playful moments are as ungainly as bears. Intuition with them is a purely feminine attribute. Humor takes the form of definite jokes. They are sometimes sportsmen, sometimes legislators, in either case the impulse being the desire for energetic action. They make good husbands, but in modern fiction they figure almost exclusively as " the man who does not understand ".

In the drawing of the charlatan Gissing shows an unusual faculty, if we consider how far from his actual experience of life was any notion of shrewd business methods. There are grades of charlatanism of which the lowest is Dyce Lashmar *(Our Friend the Charlatan)*, perfectly unscrupulous, clever, determined and an attractive and fluent talker. Equally hopeless is Daniel Otway, a rather jolly sinner in *The Crown of Life*, who goes his way with no thought of becoming penitent. A more serious conception is that of Eustace Glazzard in *Denzil Quarrier* whose story is given

an unusually suggestive touch by his interest in modeling a head of Judas. Reuban Elgar *(The Emancipated)* and Vincent Lacour *(Isabel Clarendon)* are men whose clever faculties were exercised not with the idea of their advancement but with the sole intent of avoiding any type of work. For example, Lacour " thought with contemptuous pity of the poor wretches who had to present themselves at bank, or office, or shop by a certain hour. ' Under no circumstances whatever ' he often said to himself with conviction, ' would I support life in that way. If it comes to the worst, there are always the backwoods. Hard enough, no doubt, but that would be in the order of things. ' " Lacour after several false starts manages to marry an heiress and so his happy fate is fulfilled. The most finished example of the charlatan type is however that of a man who blended with his charlatanism many good qualities — in fact, the reader is often in a quandary as to whether to applaud or condemn. Jasper Milvain in *New Grub Street* is the personification of shrewdness, displaying to a marked degree both its good and bad elements. But " good and bad " are perhaps too definite, too strong in their connotations. There was nothing really " bad " in Milvain — it was only that he sacrificed to the attainment of material success many of the things which are generally held highest. However, he almost managed to justify himself; he is fond of personal exposition.

> " But just understand the difference between a man like Reardon and a man like me. He is the old type of unpractical artist ; I am the literary man of 1882. He won't make concessions, or rather, he can't make them ; he can't supply the market. I — well, you may say that at present I do nothing ; but that's a great mistake, I am learning my business. Literature nowadays is a trade. Putting aside men of genius, who may succeed by mere cosmic force, your successful man of letters is your skillful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost of the market ; when one kind of goods begins to go off slackly, he is ready with something new and appetizing. He knows perfectly all the possible sources of income. "

It is an interesting example of the technical care with which Gissing wrote all his novels, that in the early pages of *New Grub Street* when Milvain is first thinking of Marian, he remarks to his sisters, " But it's a pity she doesn't play the piano. " After he has jilted Marian and married Amy Reardon, who through death and inheritance has become a rich widow, the novel closes

with a clever scene between Milvain and his wife of which this is the concluding part.

" ' No, I am far from a bad fellow. I feel kindly to everyone who deserves it. I like to be generous, in word and deed. Trust me, there's many a man who would like to be generous, but is made despicably mean by necessity. ...I have much of the weakness that might have become viciousness, but I am now far from the possibility of being vicious. ...Happiness is the nurse of virtue... Go to the piano, dear, and play me something. If I don't mind I shall fall into Whelpdale's vein, and talk about my ' blessedness '. Ha ! Isn't the world a glorious place ? '

" ' For rich people. '

" ' Yes, for rich people. How I pity the poor devils ! — play anything. Better still if you will sing, my nightingale ! '

" So Amy first played, and then sang, and Jasper lay back in dreamy bliss. "

So ends the story of Jasper Milvain — the heir to all New Grub Street.

It is hardly necessary to stress the exceptional manner in which these widely varying characters exemplified their age. There is the fallacy of the democratic theory as realized in Richard Mutimer *(Demos)* ; the radical philosophy of Osmond Waymark *(The Unclassed)* ; the problem of mental emancipation from the domestic point of view as seen by Cecily Doran *(The Emancipated)* ; the increase in education among women, pictured in its finest development in Rhoda Nunn *(The Odd Women)*, in its worst, in Jessica Morgan *(In the Year of Jubilee)* and Madeline Denyer *(The Emancipated)* ; the new laxity in religious belief as Godwin Peak *(Born in Exile)* exemplified ; the rising journalistic spirit in literature of which Jasper Milvain *(New Grub Street)* was a leader ; the futility of social reform in the mistaken efforts of Walter Egremont *(Thyrza)* ; the blind individualism of Maurice Hilliard *(Eve's Ransom)* ; the contemptuous attitude toward patriotism and the ideals of this civilization as felt by Harvey Rolfe *(The Whirlpool)*. Each character is a study of his age. If you desire to learn of the latter quarter of the nineteenth century and would have your knowledge of the spirit as well as the form, to read the novels of George Gissing is to reap a rich harvest.

## *CHAPTER V*

## A SUMMARY OF SWINNERTON'S CRITICISM

In 1912 Frank Swinnerton, then a young writer, published a book of noteworthy proportions entitled *George Gissing, a Critical Study*. Previous to this Swinnerton had not been heard of in the field of criticism. In fact his total claim to the title of author lay in four novels published respectively in 1909, 1910, 1911 and 1912. These novels, while they have some excellent qualities, did not at once create for their author a place in the literary world and so, wisely, he turned aside from fiction and used his genius for clear and beautiful prose to write a critical study which would claim for him the desired attention of men of letters. The result was satisfactory, the book was read and praised — although this praise was distinctly qualified by Gissing's warm admirers. Thomas Seccombe referred to it as "Mr. Swinnerton's able depreciation" and others felt that Gissing had suffered at the hands of this new spokesman. Nevertheless, all agreed that a new critic and one to be reckoned with had "arrived".

In 1923 a revised edition of this same study was published. Swinnerton by then was the author of twelve novels, at least half of which were well known, and in the meanwhile he had again tried his hand at criticism, this time turning his attention to Robert Louis Stevenson. Evidently in these more opulent years a sense of regret had come to Swinnerton that he had not acted with more generosity in his early critical estimate of Gissing. He therefore took the first edition, omitted some of the more biting remarks, gave a few of the phrases a gentler turn and added to the whole a preface explaining what he had done. This preface is an exceedingly clever piece of justification. Swin-

nerton has the art of seeming to withdraw without moving from his position at all. After being charmed with his courteous overtures we find that the actual changes in opinion are negligible. Let me quote in illustration :

" The truth is that it is extremely difficult to read through the works of a single, fairly prolific, novelist of marked temperament without coming into collision with that novelist. At least, it is difficult for me to do so. I start with the utmost candour, and I conclude with what seems to me at the time to be equal candour. But in retrospect I perceive that the journey has been a long and rather tiring one, and that while a single adverse comment may be the outcome of unbiased judgment, repeated adverse comments must be sparingly made if they are not to emphasize the critic's tiredness rather than the purity of his candour. In the first edition too many of the praises of Gissing were followed — as if automatically — with a severe modification little likely to allow the praise to impress the reader's memory. Re-reading myself, I am constrained and embarrassed as I should be at any other ungenerosity..... The present is the first opportunity I have had of saying that I had planned to write a " critical study ", and not an essay in laudation ; but after this lapse of time I fancy I have discovered some justification of Mr. Seccombe's humorous bitterness in several phrases expressive of weariness. These phrases I have omitted from the new edition. I have turned one or two others ; and I have interpolated several fresh and exhilarating passages which may be welcome. But there is not an essential change in the book. It was always a scrupulous piece of work, which did not aim at brilliance. "

There were several definite points which Swinnerton made in his *Critical Study* of Gissing : first, that Gissing was essentially an egotist and because of that unfitted to be a great novelist ; second, that Gissing displayed his greatest strength in the study of abnormal temperaments ; and third, that Gissing had a frustrate career — that his novels were failures and that he never developed his true forte as an essayist. The matter of Gissing's egotism was elucidated in Chapter II. Fastidiousness is not egotism. Common pleasures, such as the poor find in public parks, did not appeal to Gissing ; he could not understand the enjoyment of them — but that is no more egotism than an aversion to cream soup or a dislike for bright colors. His bias toward literature was perhaps his greatest limitation as a fellowman ; he could not comprehend why others did not turn to books with all the absorbing interest that was as natural to him as drawing breath. He spent most of his life with people to whom

books were of paramount importance. His letters to his family disclose not only his own scholarly zeal but that of his sisters and brothers who were constantly taking up a new language — Greek or Latin, Italian, French or German — and who put aside a portion of each day for definite study. His friends, too, were men and women to whom literature was the essence of life : Frederic Harrison, Morley Roberts, W. H. Hudson, George Meredith, Edward Clodd, Clement Shorter and all the gay fellowship of the Omar Khayyám Club, where Gissing was rated as a novelist next in power to Meredith and Hardy. Gissing's own description of a meeting of this club is one of the most interesting passages in the recently published volume of family letters.

" *(Epsom, July 18th,* 1895).

" Went to Boxhill (to Omar Khayyám dinner). Before dinner a few of us walked up the hill. Present at the dinner were Clodd, Hardy, Henry Norman, Cook, Cust, Robertson Nicoll, Shorter, Max Pemberton, E. F. Austin, George Whale, Forestier the artist, Edmond Gosse, Theodore Watts, William Sharp and many others whom I knew not. As soon as dinner was over, Meredith entered ; we all stood up and received him with applause. Clodd began the speeches by a toast to Meredith who briefly replied. He said it was the first time in his life he had publicly spoken — strange fact. Then Austin gave " The Guests " in a capital speech. Hardy replied very shortly, just mentioning that twenty-six years had passed since he first met Meredith, which was in a back room of Chapman & Hall's. Then my name was shouted, and there was nothing for it. I told the story of Meredith's accepting *The Unclassed* for Chapman, and my interview with him, when I didn't know who he was. Cust then spoke, and Cook.

" Meredith grievously aged ; very deaf and shaky, but mind clear as ever. As he came round the tables on entering, someone mentioned my name to him, and he said, ' Mr. Gissing ! Ah, where is Mr. Gissing? ' and we shook hands. Then he sat at the top of the table, talking with Clodd and Watts. On going I went to shake hands with him, and he asked me to go to his house one day. With Hardy I talked a little and he asked me to write to him. " [1]

Gissing's life belonged on the plane above that of the ordinary mortal ; he was always the scholar, the classicist, the book lover. And so it is all the more remarkable that he drew so well and with so keen an understanding people to whom literature meant little or nothing. Now and then his contempt for their

1. *Letters of George Gissing to his Family*, p. 342.

intellectual limitations expressed itself — it is his only breach of sympathy. Nevertheless, one of his favorite methods of characterization was by means of literary allusion : Maud Enderby *(The Unclassed)* a conscience-stricken aesthetic, finds comfort in the mystic faith of Rossetti ; Marian Yule *(New Grub Street)* shows her superior intelligence by quoting Tennyson's blank verse correctly and with ease ; Walter Egremont *(Thyrza)* seeking to escape the tangles of life flies to America and in his letters home to England celebrates the rising star of Walt Whitman ;[1] and these are but few of many similar usages. Swinnerton as critic has no patience with Gissing's temperament as artist, as classical scholar, or as man. Swinnerton writes of Gissing in these words : " He lacked that ease of personality that conveys itself subtly in the printed page : his was always, in his novels, the rather querulous, random self-expression of the serious egotist." As to the first part of this, it is true that Gissing, writing in a restrained classic style, seems to lack ease of personality when one considers him in contrast with, say, Wells, who enjoys a free confidential manner, or Swinnerton himself, who delights in unrestraint. Both of these writers prize their subtle cleverness of style, their ability to " play " with the reader. Gissing in this bears no relation to them ; he can no more be justly compared with them than can Sir Thomas Browne be compared to Stephen Leacock. But, if one considers Gissing with George Eliot or Thackeray, one does not find his austerity of personality such a vital matter. As I have previously suggested Gissing could not trifle with his viewpoint : he took a certain point of view and maintained it throughout his work. He was not interested in being clever or in shocking people, and in spite of his sensational life story, written in the best yellow-journal style by Morley Roberts, one seeks in vain for anything salacious or morally unpleasant in Gissing's novels. He wanted

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1. I wrote to Morley Roberts to inquire if Gissing during his American travels had met Walt Whitman. The following reply from Mr. Roberts was helpful and highly interesting :

" He never met Walt Whitman. In fact it was I who thrust W. W. down his throat, much against his will, as, with his classical tastes, he found him at first very repulsive. However, after a time he grew enthusiastic as you must be aware and was grateful to me for bringing *Leaves of Grass* to him and reading passages from it. If I remember rightly it was *The Song of the Broad Axe* I began with. "

simply to present life, real life, in the highest artistic form. If anything, he erred in being too serious. A letter which he wrote to Morley Roberts, and which was published in its entirety in a volume of *The Bookman*, contains an attempt at self-justification which is almost pitiful in its sincerity. Gissing had been deeply hurt by the loose adverse criticism in some of the reviews of his books :

" I want to insist that if people think it worth while to write at length about my books, they must take the trouble to study them seriously. In this section of the lower middle class, the good is not on the surface, neither will it be found on the surface of my narrative. [Refers to *In the Year of Jubilee*]. But there it lies to be found and recognized by a competent reader. I can't allow that my ' vision ' is ' distorted ' and assuredly my ' rendering of detail ' is not my only ' realism '. If the man had instanced an individual ; if he had said, ' There exists no woman so base as Fanny French ' ; he would have been on safer ground ; for it is undeniable that the possibilities of goodness in Fanny are microscopic. Such women there are in plenty, but he knows not of them. To class the whole group of characters as he does is to show either carelessness or incompetence.

" Thus much of this particular book. Now I want to say something of my books in general.

" The other day James Payn had a paragraph about my work, as a whole, in the *Illustrated London News*. ' The subjects for his pen are for the most part, at best genteel, and not so very genteel. Their lives are not worth living. He contrives to interest us in them in spite of ourselves. Their views are commonplace and sordid ' etc., etc. Now, pray tell me, does this give a fair idea of my books, taken altogether ? I don't think so, but the mischief of it is that this impression is getting fixed in people's minds. My books deal with people of many social strata... My characters range from the vileness of ' Arry Mutimer, to the genial and cultured respectability of Mr. Warricombe. There are books as disparate as *The Nether World* and *The Emancipated*. But what I desire to insist upon is this : that the most characteristic, the most important part of my work is that which deals with a class of young men distinctive of our time — well educated, fairly bred, but *without money*. It is this fact (as I gather from reviews and conversation) of the *poverty* of my people which tells against their recognition as civilized beings. ' Oh, ' said someone to Bullen, ' do ask Mr. Gissing to make his people a little better off ! ' There you have it.

" Now think of some of the young men, Reardon, Biffin, Milvain, Peak, Earwaker, Elgar, Mallard. Do you mean to say that books containing such a number of such men deal, first and foremost, with the commonplace and the sordid ? Why these fellows are the very reverse of commonplace : most of them are martyred by the fact of possessing uncommon endowments. Is it not so ? This side of my work, to me the most important, I have never yet seen recognised.

" I say nothing about my women. That is a moot point. But surely there are some of them who help to give colour to the groups I draw.

" No, people are running off on a side issue. Do try to put the other view of the case. " [1]

To me this short vindication straight from the author is more conducive to an understanding of his work than pages of criticism which find conclusion in such phrases as " inverted sentimentality " or " the rather querulous, random, self-expression of the serious egotist ". What Swinnerton meant when he spoke of Gissing's " inverted sentimentality " is difficult to understand, [2] and becomes only a little less involved when it is explained as " A shrinking agonized recognition of the inevitability of sorrow ". This refers to Gissing's so-called inclination to whine (a characteristic which offends the sanguine, well-fed critics) and is the excuse, I suppose, for the use of the unpleasant word " querulous ". The truth is, that most of Gissing's " whining " was the overflow of his sympathy when he reflected upon life and the hardships it made inevitable for those people whose refinement was superior to their circumstances.

Furthermore, I am puzzled by the use of the word " random ". Did Gissing lack direction in his art ? On consideration one realizes that Gissing was one of the most purposeful of authors, not a writer at random, experimenting with artistic conceptions, with style and with form. To be sure there are many varying currents of thought in his books : socialism, atheism, positivism, imperialism, intellectualism, classicism. But these are incorporated because, as Gissing says, he wished to present the life of his day and these were all a part of that life. Whether they indicated the wavering philosophy of the author or not, they had their legitimate place in the novels. It occurs to me that when Swinnerton wrote that particular phrase about Gissing, namely, that " his was always, in his novels, the rather querulous, random, self-expression of the serious egotist ", he must have had in mind *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* : there would be

1. " George Gissing and His Critics, " A letter from Gissing to Mr. Morley Roberts published by permission of George Gissing's Executors — *The Bookman* (London), XLVII (1915), 123.

2. Another example of a strange choice of words is Morley Robert's remark *(Private Life of Henry Maitland,* pp. 115 and 133) that Gissing was an " inverted idealist ". " Inverted ", because of his love for the classics !

a faint element of truth in the remark as applied to that book [1] but as applied to the novels it is an absurdity of the worst kind. However, the chief difficulty with many of the amazing things that Swinnerton has said about Gissing is that they are so subtly expressed that only the extensive reader of Gissing can perceive their full fallacy.

Another idea of Swinnerton's with which we cannot but disagree is his declaration that Gissing's " best books are studies of abnormal temperament ". Let me quote Swinnerton's explanation of this conclusion. He wrote, " If, as is said in *The Crown of Life,* love ' is the personal experience of the very few, ' the fact will help us to realize that these books of Gissing's are all studies of abnormal temperament. " Does Swinnerton mean to suggest that one has to be abnormal to experience love, or that to experience love makes one abnormal ? What indeed is one to make of such literary criticism ? The real problem is the exact meaning of the word abnormal, and whether it may be rightly applied to Gissing's best studies. According to the dictionary the abnormal is that which is unnatural, unusual, and varying from the norm. It may be easily understood that there is a wide difference between the abnormal and the unusual when considered in the abstract, but, when dealing in the particular, the difference is apt to become confused. Nearly all fiction finds its chief interest in studies of *unusual* temperaments ; a small portion of fiction specializes in *abnormality*. I would not deny that Gissing wrote of some abnormal people : Bernard Kingcote, Harriet Casti, Mrs. Wade and Edward Widdowson are examples of characters who were abnormal — and they are excellent studies of their kind. But what of the twenty or more others who are undoubtedly his best characterizations, most of them of unusual temperaments but nevertheless normal. Let me refer you to Osmond Waymark, Isabel Clarendon, Richard Mutimer, Mrs. Mutimer, Denzil Quarrier, Ross Mallard, Rhoda Nunn, Jasper Milvain, Marian Yule, Constance Bride, Thyrza and Lydia Trent, Gilbert Grail, Annabel Newthorpe, Harvey Rolfe, Hugh Carnaby, Maurice Hilliard, Eve Madelay, Sidwell Warricombe and Godwin Peak.

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1. May I make the suggestion that by the writing of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft,* Gissing gave birth to a conception of his character which all the efforts of his friends and critics cannot repair.

The last may serve as an example as he has the most fully developed temperament of any of the characters. Peak was sensitive, self-conscious and fastidious — a potent combination and one unlikely to result in happiness. After he had won various prizes and made a reputation as a scholar, he left Whitelaw College because his uncle, Andrew Peak, a hopeless cockney, opened a cheap eating place opposite the college and called it " Peak's ". In spite of his plebeian origin, Godwin was by nature a gentleman and he wished to associate with those who embodied all that was the ideal of his natural desires. A few years later, while staying in a country town, he chanced to meet Buckland Warricombe, a former classmate at Whitelaw. Peak was invited to dinner at Warricombe's charming home and during the evening was carried away with admiration for these people and the refined atmosphere of their home life. It happens that during the years following his departure from Whitelaw, Godwin had become an atheist and had written and published anonymously several atheistic articles of a vehement character. While at the Warricombe's dinner table he was questioned as to his religious beliefs, and realizing the importance of this matter to these people, and the destructive effect on further acquaintance if he should disclose his real stand, he declared his orthodoxy. I think that you will agree with me that Godwin has shown nothing but normality in his actions thus far.

Now, upon continued intimacy, it was only probable that Godwin should fall in love with Sidwell Warricombe who in her person symbolized all the virtues of breeding and culture. It becomes the not unworthy object of all his ambitions to marry her. He says " think the confession as ridiculous as you like : my one supreme desire is to marry a perfectly refined woman. Put it in correct terms. I am a plebeian, and I aim at marrying a lady. " Is this an unnatural decision on his part ? Decidedly not. It is the direct and irrevocable development of his character as a man. Peak realized that in order to appear before the Warricombes as Sidwell's accredited suitor, he must in some way establish his social position. The idea presented itself that clergymen, members of the cloth, are accepted without question in any society. After a period of reflection more logical than conscientious, Godwin began to study to take orders. Now this was not such a remarkable turn of affairs, because Peak, a confirmed atheist, was incapable of appreciating the sacrilege involved in his choice ; moreover, as his ideal of living

was a quiet country home with plenty of time to read and to write, the ministry seemed as easy a way of attaining his desires as could be found. He reasoned with himself that he would probably, on the whole, make as good a minister as most men.

The climax of the book was reached when the Warricombes met some of Peak's former friends in London who knew of his atheism and the authorship of his articles. Sidwell's brother furiously attacked Godwin, accusing him of deception ; and Godwin, his plans shattered, retired to London to take up again his humble work as a scientist. Although Sidwell had requited his love she lacked the strength of resolve to cast her former life behind her and marry him. Later, when he inherited sufficient money to live independently, he made a final plea to Sidwell, but she refused. So he traveled alone to Europe, where he died, friendless, and " in exile ". Godwin, as may be clearly seen, was a most unusual character ; he was brilliant, a man of parts, a dreamer, and an idealist, with a strange element of unconscious knavery. He had difficulty in adjusting himself to life : he was an alien in his own class, and, because of his sensitive egotism, an alien in the class to which he was spiritually akin.

But is this abnormality ? Are we correct in classing men who have an intelligence above the plane of the ordinary, whose tastes are fastidious, and whose ideals have few doctrinal bounds, are we correct in classing them as abnormal ? If these characteristics lead them to perform acts which are irrational when considered from their point of view, perhaps *that* is abnormality. But there was nothing irrational or illogical in Godwin's decisions or actions. His character is one which upon study becomes amazingly simple ; so, too, do all the other characters which I have listed. They are individually, and as a whole, typical of certain intellectual aspects of their age and their race. That Gissing could present abnormality and with singular success is undoubtedly true, but that his " best books are studies of abnormal temperament " is an erroneous conclusion.

The aim of the critic should be to help the reader understand an author, not misunderstand him. The reader who turns to Gissing for studies of abnormal temperament will sadly misinterpret the object of Gissing's art, a sincere realism. Swinnerton himself senses this fallacy when he says " and, as realism is largely concerned with normality, Gissing's studies are in no way to be regarded

(as they have been regarded) as realistic ". This indeed is the point of the problem and the place where Swinnerton's position shows its fundamental error. For Gissing is as firm a realist, especially in his characterizations, as ever wrote novels in the English tongue.

It is in the same manner that Swinnerton has spoken of Gissing's frustrate career, stressing the tragedy of his literary standing as a great might-have-been — a man who somehow never made his mark. This idea is anything but convincing to one who has studied Gissing ; but what of the great number of people who read one novel of an author's, then glance through a critical study to catch a few poignant and quotable phrases, and with such authority see no reason to feel any modesty before the gods ? *There* the harm is done.

Swinnerton quite unintentionally gives to his critical study a humorous quality when he finds that he cannot even spare the reputation of Gissing's readers. He says of them, " But in the nature of things his books will be increasingly read by ill-educated egotists, because they voice numerous dislikes — of the vulgar herd, of conventional Christians, and so on — which are capable of flattering a sense of superiority in mis-cultured readers. The ideas he expressed have, as it were, percolated through the strata of intellectual and intelligent people, and are now food for the agitated lower middle class. Accordingly, it is among the members of that class that Gissing is at present finding his most constant readers. "

Strange to say these "ill-educated egotists" are able and willing to pay anywhere from thirty dollars to one thousand one hundred and seventy-five dollars (the price paid for *Workers in the Dawn* at a recent sale in New York) [1] for a first edition of any one of Gissing's novels. No, one cannot agree with Swinnerton's conclusions here, for, although Gissing's novels do voice numerous dislikes, yet by reason of their intellectual nature they are on a plane above that of the ignorant malcontent. " The agitated lower middle class " find their social consolation in a less classic form. Instead it is to the intellectual group of the world that Gissing has made and always will make his strongest appeal, for, although

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1. The Notable Library of Major W. Van R. Whitall sold on February 14, 15 & 16, 1927, at the galleries of the American Art Association, New York City.

Swinnerton on the whole ignores it, Gissing wrote some of the most beautiful prose in a century whose prose was unsurpassed ; he was a master of irony fit to be classed with Samuel Butler ; and he wrote novels which in their restrained yet vigorous realism awoke quiescent England to a new and not altogether pleasant vision of herself — an England seen without the humor of *Pickwick*, without the solemnity of *Barchester Towers*, seen only as Thackeray had seen it, and Dickens, when he forget sentiment and became the serious artist of life.

## *CHAPTER VI*

## THE NOVELS OF SWINNERTON

There is a period early in the career of every writer which may be termed formative. It is that time before the writer has been able to assert or establish his own individuality, and as a result he is sensitive to the style and thought of others ; he experiments a little with this, a little with that — imitating consciously and unconsciously. Swinnerton published his first novel, *The Merry Heart*, in 1909 but he had written three before that, none of which had found publishers. Following *The Merry Heart* came *The Young Idea* in 1910 and then *The Casement* in 1911. *The Happy Family*, Swinnerton's first novel to find American publication, was brought out in 1912, the same year that *George Gissing, a Critical Study* made its appearance. These few biographical facts are sufficient to assure us that Swinnerton was reading and studying Gissing (and that is not a task which may be briefly accomplished) during the years when he was writing his first novels — his formative years as we have suggested.

Swinnerton is a man of a very distinct personality ; he has three weapons all bright and well sharpened ; they are satire, irony and humor. As is often the case these faculties are found at their best in one whose life has included trial, sickness and sorrow. Swinnerton was born in 1884 at Wood Green, a suburb of London " without any of the rural attributes its name suggests ". [1] From earliest youth Swinnerton experienced all the most trying hardships of impecunious city life. When eight years of age a serious illness incapacitated him for further schooling. However, during

1. I am indebted to Mr. Grant Overton's short article on Swinnerton (see bibliography) for all the biographical detail which I have used.

the years of ill health which followed he read widely, and at fourteen was able to become a clerk in the London office of J. M. Dent & Company. Later he went to the firm of Chatto & Windus, where he has remained ever since as literary adviser. One of the most noteworthy features of this brave biography is that Swinnerton had practically no education in the formal sense. It explains his absolute ignorance of the academic viewpoint, a feature which both adds and detracts from the value of his literary criticism. Swinnerton is very fond of casting slurs on what he refers to as " a classical education " such as that furnished by the great universities in England. In a recent article in *Harper's* he said. " In my opinion, the objectionably mannered men in England, who give foreigners the impression that the English as a nation are egotists, are the intellectuals, the intelligentsia. Most of them are to be found among those who have at one or another of our older universities received what is called ' a classical education '. .. From close study of a few of these classical students, I have come to the conclusion that the classical education in England makes a man feel high and haughty. Why this should be so I do not know. "[1] Considering the scholarly devotion and the love of the classics which animated Gissing's life we cannot but realize that in reality Swinnerton is a man utterly out of sympathy with the things which Gissing held dearest.

But to Swinnerton as to Gissing we must accord the greatest admiration for his determined ambition to succeed. Swinnerton, so his friends tell us, has written nearly all his novels under the greatest stress of mind, of domestic difficulties, of illness, and of poverty. His hours for creative work were those which he could eke out of the time demanded for his daily toil : he wrote in the evening or during a supposedly restful vacation time. Of late years his success must of course have alleviated these conditions. He has made two lecture tours in America : the first was not so significant (nearly all English writers make one), but a second proves his popularity and the stability of his reputation. He has been writing a number of diversified prose productions for such varying publications as *The Bookman* and *Harper's Bazaar*. In a story published recently in *The Woman's Home Companion* Swinnerton has his

1. Frank Swinnerton, " Are the English Egotists ? " *Harper's*, CLIV (1927), 178.

heroine make for herself a most attractive dinner dress by the aid of a paper pattern. We are led to reflect how marvelous are the workings of literary adaptation.

Swinnerton's first novel, *The Merry Heart*, was distinctly an inferior book. As a saving grace there is one infectious character, Charles Lockerey, " Locritus " as he calls himself, a clever, loquacious young person who suffers from confirmed optimism. The plot of the book is neither old nor really new : it includes a father who turns out to be an Earl in disguise (although he might have turned out to be anything from all that the reader is able to make of him) ; an unsympathetic suffragist mother who is poorly portrayed ; a sister, Fanny, who runs away with a young villain upon very short acquaintance ; and her simple suitor, Thomas Dickers, who symbolizes British brawn and honor. The subtitle of the book assists in its understanding : it is called " a gentle melodrama " ; this refers, no doubt, to some gentle blackmail, one gentle seduction, a gentle but satisfying disposal of the villain by means of death, and two gentle romances.

Following close upon this comes *The Young Idea*, a novel in which Swinnerton manages to strike his keynote. It is the story of two delightfully individual sisters and a worthless brother. The girls have all that piquancy and depth of restless thought, that charm of an unconscious chastity, which is characteristic of Swinnerton's most moral heroines. Unfortunately Swinnerton creates only one worthy young man to divide between these two worthy girls, and at the end, Gladys, really the more interesting of the two, is left with no fate in view. Not that we insist on an inclusive happy ending but in a book of this light nature, " a comedy of environment " according to the subtitle, one expects a pleasant completeness as a finish. Swinnerton in these two books shows the faulty plot work of a beginner ; Mrs. Galbraith *(The Young Idea)* dies with all that opportuneness which is the deciding force in the motivation of most young novelists. The best of the book is to be found in the scenes in the Verren parlor when a mixed company is assembled for an evening's social " enjoyment ". Swinnerton as author never comments, but he manages to make the characters and the cultural limitations of those present perfectly apparent to the reader because he presents them from the viewpoint of the more keen of his people. We see James MacConochie Smith as through the bright eye of Gladys, and laugh with

her, and come to like her. But the book as a whole strikes only the note of superficiality. Its more forceful moments, when the author drives his characters into an emotional frenzy, do not seem to be able to lift the tale above those common little strata of London flat life where it belongs. The most unhappy reflection at this point, however, is that *Summer Storm*, a more recent publication of Swinnerton's, is very similar to this novel and, sad to say, no better.

In *The Casement*, published in the following year, Swinnerton sketched a different phase of life ; here the characters and the settings are those of people of means and social breadth. This is the story of a young girl, very much like Gladys and numerous others to follow later, who falls in love with a former suitor of her sister's. The sister, although now married, highly resents this pirating of a man whom she still regards in a sentimental light. *The Casement* is the small bedroom window by which the heroine sits and meditates — we suppose that in some way it is symbolic of her life. The remarkable part is that, with practically no story and with but one or two characters to hold the interest, the novel does exist. As is the case with its predecessor, this book also shows an important development in Swinnerton's art ; he tries discarding plot and substituting for it the analysis of character. *The Casement*, moreover, represents the first full blooming of Swinnerton's prose style which is his best claim to literary significance.

*The Happy Family*, published in 1912, is on the whole more of a book than any of those preceding. Here Swinnerton does not limit himself in scope but achieves well over a dozen characters and a plot of lifelike ease and interest. Its main distinction from the other novels is that its purpose is not the study of the individual but of family life, group life. The title, needless to say, is a mixture of satire and irony. This book is not so modern in its style and form as is Swinnerton's more characteristic work. It is a novel which would fit as well into the late nineteenth century as the opening quarter of the twentieth. The Amerson family is a brilliant composite creation : work-weary father ; inefficient shallow mother ; two brothers, one unlikably conscientious, the other, likably unconscientious ; three girls, Grace with a clear eye for advantage, Mabel, weak and silly, and Mary who blindly loves them all and never dreams that she is the only one whose character is sweet and fine. Their love affairs are pitifully characteristic.

Roger Dennett the hero works in a publishing office, the chief occupation of most of Swinnerton's men. His family, including a young sister of parts, are drawn in exact opposition to the Amersons — the Dennetts have imagination and reserve. The Brights, another center of interest, are still different ; they present a sort of unstable glamour in which fashionable clothes and promiscuous friends play their part. The book on the whole shows a breadth of creative power which is a decided advance over Swinnerton's earlier work.

*On the Staircase,* Swinnerton's next novel, published in 1914, continues with success the type of fiction which specializes in the family life of middle class Londoners. Here again there are several centers of interest, family groups : the Grettons, the Amberleys, Adrian Velancourt and his wife Cissie. Joseph Amberley and Barbara Gretton are ably handled. Both confirmed egotists, they manage to be generous enough to fall in love with each other. Swinnerton as author is developing strength in many ways. His humor has an epigrammatic flavor, giving that quick touch to character which is invaluable in group portrayal. The story is made poignant through the tragedy of Adrian Velancourt, dreamy, ineffectual, lonely, a man born to failure ; this is a new type for Swinnerton, and he has included in Velancourt many of the characteristics with which Gissing loved to endow his men. It is in many ways an excellent book, one of its best features being the portrayal of a group of middle class people struggling with the gaiety of a social evening for which they lack the necessary tone of ease.

*The Chaste Wife,* appearing in 1916, shows a slightly new turn of mind and a more concentrated group of interest. The plot centers on the marriage of a poor young man and a girl of well-to-do and distinguished family. The pitfalls of any such alliance are clearly seen by Swinnerton's perceptive eye, but even these would not have been disastrous to happiness if Stephen More the hero had not felt it necessary to confess a former love affair with another woman. Then does Priscilla doubt the wisdom of her brave choice. The cat Romeo — and Swinnerton has depicted many excellent and interesting cats — has rather a doubtful charm, and when " he " is depended upon for the final artistic touch — without which no novel is completely flavoured — we must admit that the unexpected appearance of a small " Romeo " falls rather flat. If

we had liked Romeo better, we might have forgiven " him " ; as it was we considered it an intrusion.

It is to *Nocturne*, of course, that the devoted readers of Swinnerton at first refer you. This is Swinnerton's most original and distinctive work. H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett have outdone themselves in praise of it and have even gone so far as to belittle their own books in comparison — which you must admit is very far indeed. The events of the book take place in a single night and they exclusively concern five characters : Pa, a creation in decay ; Emmy, the commonplace daughter ; Jenny, the spirited daughter ; and their suitors, Alf Rylett and Keith Redington. Emmy's wooing of Alf, after she has won the evening's pleasure which Alf intended for Jenny, is one of the ablest scenes in modern fiction ; Emmy takes Jenny's left-overs and with a strength unsuspected she capitalizes disadvantage. Jenny who stays home to retrim a hat receives a mysterious note from Keith directing her to come to a yacht anchored (most unlawfully) in the center of the Thames. Jenny is tired, forlorn, unhappy, but she never hesitates, with all the courage of a more gallant adventurer she rides in the limousine to the embankment and goes out to the yacht. Keith as a character is veiled in mystery ; there is the confession that his life has been none too pleasant or respectable, but he has a romantic dash, a charm of indifferent bravado, beside which the honest worth of an " Alf " pales into insignificance. One of the unique features of this unique novel is the different manner in which the two love stories are portrayed ; Emmy and Alf's affair has the realism of " the ignobly decent ", " the essentially unheroic " ; Jenny and Keith's affair is romance, as commonplace in origin and in life as the other but tinged with the unusual, the bright color of life. The two stories run parallel, two sisters each having a night out with her young man, and yet there is all the difference imaginable in their respective evenings. No one can read this book and fail to realize that Swinnerton has earned a place among the English novelists of established merit. It is as close to flawless production of its kind (and everything may only be judged in its kind) as has ever been seen in English fiction. Such words are grandiloquent and to be avoided unless truth gives to the writer undeniable conviction.

*Shops and Houses* is a new type of story and one which might well be developed further. It is a study of small town life with

emphasis on the mean and narrow minds of the typical inhabitants. The plot is based on the arrival of a family of Vechantors who buy out the leading grocery business in Beckwith. The social leaders of the town bear the same name and the family having been small they can only conclude that they are cousins. This is a situation well adapted to bring out interesting results in characterization. Louis Vechantor the hero is rather a cold figure, perhaps because of the author's attempt at super-refinement. The heroine Dorothy is a vital study in willfulness and modesty. The town gossip, Miss Lampe, the beefy British clergyman, Mr. Toppett, and Veronica Hughes, a village flirt, are overdrawn and as a result lack subtilty. However, on the whole, this excursion into small town psychology is successful.

*September*, published in 1919, is an acute study of early autumnal love. Marian Forster, in her late thirties but still beautiful and young, has begun to lose interest in her husband Howard Forster, over fifty, fat and fatuous. The action takes definite proportions when two new elements are introduced into their quiet life. Cherry Mant, a modern sophisticated child, comes with her nice young brother to visit the Forsters and Marian through some mutual friends meets an attractive and (what is equally important) impressionable young man, Nigel Sinclair. Marian is in the midst of a very mild flirtation with Nigel and is contemplating the advisability of making it less mild, when wandering into the garden she sees Howard and Cherry in each other's arms. The story is developed from Marian's point of view and in this way the pathos of her position is not emphasized but left to the reader's perception. There is little doubt that Swinnerton is at his best in his portrayals of women ; not only is Marian excellently done but Cherry with her devil-may-care charm is an intriguing foil for the older woman. In the end Cherry and Nigel become engaged, and Marian with a quiet but amused smile faces the proximity of an uneventful middle age. With the exception of that of *Nocturne*, the plot is the very best which Swinnerton has evolved. Its motivation proceeds with a deceptive carelessness : Marian's discovery of Nigel's interest in Cherry by his quoting of a funny little saying of hers which Howard in his day had also quoted is as clever a touch of comedy as may be imagined.

There are some critics who would rank Swinnerton's novel *Coquette* as only inferior to his *Nocturne*. If your literary standards

include the ideal, truth and force at any price, you may place this book high in the scale of achievement. *Coquette* is a very powerful and remarkable study of a little guttersnipe, Sally Minto, who in spite of her depressing surroundings and absolute lack of advantages has the brains to push ahead and rise out of her environment. Her first step in self-improvement is the dyeing of her hair a flashing red. She has no morals and goes after what she wants in life with all the sneaking craftiness of a dog attempting to get a bone which is in the possession of a larger dog. The book's only claim to any decent morality is in the climax brought about by Sally's duplicity — which ends in her loss of both lover and husband. The story abounds in characters of a sensational unpleasantness, and the reader might well be led to doubt the truth of such a squalid narrative did not the daily newspapers bear evidence that such lives are lived.

It is quite evident that after writing such a novel as *Coquette* the author must find relief in some such pleasant path as is represented in *The Three Lovers*. This is a cheerful easy-going book with a refreshing heroine, Patricia Quin. It contains some delightful dialogues between Patricia and her three lovers. At first, I wondered why this novel left me with a sense of disappointment, and then discovered the reason ; there is not a single character in the book which in any way develops as the story progresses. The three lovers, when one is first introduced to them at one of those admirable party scenes which Swinnerton does so well, are exactly the same men as they are at the end of the story. Patricia herself, by being indiscreet, gains a little wisdom — otherwise the tale is one of pure superficiality. The Swinnerton of *The Happy Family*, *Nocturne*, and *September* had led us to expect something more.

*Young Felix* is a study of London lower middle class life presented as a background for the gay infectious bravery of Felix Hunter. The fates deal Felix anything but a good hand ; however, he is one of those essentially buoyant people who never realize their own tragedies. While Felix himself is an original character, the manner of his presentation and the style of the book acclaim the influence of H. G. Wells. Whether Swinnerton is conscious of it or not, he might easily have been reading *Kipps* five minutes before he wrote the opening chapters of *Young Felix*, and the futility of the hopeful Mr. Lewisham *(Love and Mr. Lewisham)* pursues the equally futile Felix throughout his early life. There are a

number of character creations in *Young Felix* but none more clever than the grandfather " Grumps ", one of those terrible decadents such as " Pa " in *Nocturne* or " The Old Man " in *The Chaste Wife.* " Grumps " achieves a most marvelous and interesting drunk, boasting a quality of reality from which an author less mischievous than Swinnerton might well have retreated. Estelle, Felix's wife, is one of those unconvincingly unpleasant people — she is Sally Minto born to a few better advantages. In the abstract the book has the appearance of autobiography ; it is the first blooming of a new quality in Swinnerton's art, a casual meaty style of portrayal which, while it reminds one almost immediately of the method of H. G. Wells, yet is not inferior to his work, even at its best.

*The Elder Sister* is a very different book from *Young Felix* : here is tragedy, stark tragedy, and there is no toying with the balance of life, no mixture of laughter and tears to mitigate its sorrow. A study in human weakness, it bases its plot on the inevitable triangle and the arrangement of that equation for which Swinnerton shows a decided preference — two women and one man. Anne and Vera are the quiet and respectable daughters of an insignificant middle class family who live with the placidity of their kind in one of the cheaper suburbs of London. For occupation each holds an office position : for amusement they have between them one beau, Mortimer. Anne is the more sensible of the two, Vera, the more passionate. Mortimer has a vague attractiveness of personality largely attributable to his difference from the " common herd " ; viewed by the unsympathetic eye, he simply appears to be a weak, fretful, selfish, discontented misanthrope — in short, an extremely worthless person. Mortimer marries Anne — and then decides that he really loves Vera. Finally Anne is deserted, and Mortimer and Vera flee to the country, not to happiness, we are sure, but at least to all they deserve. The tragic tone is broken by the suggestion at the end that Anne is to regain happiness with another man ; this is inartistic, if merciful. The mere plot is not convincing but Swinnerton by admirable character analysis manages to achieve an inevitability in the *dénouement.* The whole story is written in the grey tones of suffering, the characters seeking for a way out from beneath the dark cloud of restricting circumstance.

*Summer Storm,* published in 1926, is a novel of no importance.

It shows no advance on any form of his previous work. The heroines are two typists of widely differing charm : Polly Lane, a pleasant scrupulous young woman, and Beatrice Gayney, beautiful and unscrupulous. In Henry Falconer, the hero, Swinnerton has attempted a new type, an ex-actor and man of the world. It is a poor characterization and as a result Falconer's romance with Polly is one the most misconceived affairs which Swinnerton has ever written. As I understand from the title and the explanation of it given in the book, *Summer Storm* is intended to be rather a light story, the tale of a struggle soon passed over. This type of novel must have a simple plot, interesting but not too deep in its significance. Swinnerton, by mistake, gives the book a tragic plot, particularly in the part played by Beatrice, and includes in it several scenes of great melodramatic intensity. This is poor art, indeed, for the mood of the book is obscured and its style and purpose left in doubt. One enjoys most some of the short characterizations ; for example, Mr. Lane who sells books and loves them, Jessie, an unattractive but undertanding girl, and Mercy Simmons with her gooseberry eyes. The book however is a sad disappointment. One feels that Swinnerton is repeating himself and unsuccessfully.

To speak of Swinnerton's novels in general we may say that he writes principally of the lower middle class life in London and in the cheaper suburbs. The exceptions to this are the three successful studies of the upper middle classes found in *The Casement*, *Shops and Houses* and *September*. His greatest weakness is in plot work ; few of his endings have a finished effect, the reader is left dangling, dissatisfied. This is notable particularly in *The Happy Family*, *On the Staircase*, and *Young Felix*. His best motivation is achieved through character analysis as in the case of *September*. When he is unable to proceed by that method, he is at a loss and finds it necessary to use the various devices which are only too familiar to the reader.

For settings Swinnerton is at his best in the business streets of London and in the commonplace suburbs with their rows of little houses all alike. His London seems to be seen largely from the top of a swaying omnibus. The West End and all the abodes of fashion and affluence are hidden in an unrevealed grandeur. *The Three Lovers* presents a part of the semi-fashionable town life which is not typical of Swinnerton's field. He does not belong in

the bright cabaret but with Gladys Verren in the small parlor-sitting room of one of the ninety-six identical flats which comprise " Culverin Mansions ", or walking quietly in Hyde Park with Mortimer, Anne and Vera who have come out to listen to the public band concert. His men are largely occupied in printing offices, the only business we may judge with which Swinnerton is familiar ; his girls, if of the working class, are stenographers — a limitation which even the most idealistic analysis cannot completely overcome.

It is in his portrayals of young women that Swinnerton does his most convincing and original work ; in fact, one is led to say that his novels are all written from the feminine point of view. His analysis of their restless half-formed thought bears a naturalness delightful to the reader. The men, that is the young men, are all modern editions of the Gissing type with, of course, such variations as would be expected. Young girls in the early teens such as Rachel Lane in *Summer Storm* or Edith Dennett in *The Happy Family* are well drawn, and this is an age that few novelists are able to present successfully ; the majority feel that they must have either the child, or the woman, or the definite child-woman, never attaining that intermediate something which is none of these but has a quality essentially its own.

Swinnerton writes on one theme, love ; no matter of what he is speaking his constant preoccupation is with sex. That is the reason, I think, why one sees signs of exhaustion in his last novel. After reading it many would say that he was " written out ". The difficulty is in knowing just how long a writer can last who has only one theme. Is, say, fourteen novels his limit ? In *Shops and Houses* Swinnerton broke away and allowed other motives and other thoughts as well as those of love to sway his characters. In *Young Felix*, by means of a new style, a broader vision was glimpsed. But as many must have seen, when Swinnerton published his following novel, *The Elder Sister*, he had not continued any of his new developments but reverted to the unrestricted pursuit of his original theme, love. His future novels must invade new fields : *Nocturne*, *Coquette*, *September*, and *The Elder Sister* cannot be repeated ; their possibilities have been exhausted.

## NOTE

Since this account was first written, in 1927, Swinnerton has published three novels : *A Brood of Ducklings*, 1928 ; *Sketch of a Sinner*, 1929 ; and *The Georgian House*, 1932. The first is negligible, being the dual romance of two very lovely girls (their loveliness is emphasized to the point of absurdity) with the surprise lover of one carefully withheld until the very end. There is a general Priestley tone about the book, with the casual meeting of people who soon come to figure largely in one another's lives. *Sketch of a Sinner* is much more clever in its characterizations. Sebastian, a lover of things old, with a timid childlike charm, Lydia, the young wife, not interested in his interests but having a sense of fitness, and her gloomy mother and father, are all memorable. Lydia's lovers are less so. The plot is a blending of weak and strong features ; the suggestion of Sebastian's weak heart is completely convincing to the reader who waits and waits for him suddenly to die. The introduction of Gerald by means of Lydia's nearly being run down by a car would be acceptable as an incident in itself, were it not for the fact that an almost exactly parallel incident finally removes Gerald from her life.

*The Georgian House* is in many ways much more of an accomplishment. One is quickly reminded of an earlier novel, *Shops and Houses*, for *The Georgian House* is another excursion into small town life. One really comes to know Sandersfold, and there is not only the unity of plot but a certain unity of place which the story of the small town achieves. The women are excellent : Ruth Coulevain, distasteful to the reader but an admirable drawing of an unscrupulous woman ; Lettice Holpen, wonderful in her erratic self-destruction, strong words, perhaps, for merely a rather nice young person who was more witty than wise ; and Rose Davitto, a pleasing blending of sweetness and perception, who it develops is to have the much battered hero in the end. Philip Spears is typical again of the Gissing hero, with a capacity for doing the wrong thing (witness his entirely unnecessary marriage to Ruth Coulevain), with his rebellion against society, and with his love for books and leisure. Also, as

is frequently the case with Gissing men, he has certain unwise incidents in his past. Leonard Holpen has also his Gissing forbears. He has that fine shade of charlatanism in his nature which Gissing drew so well; I can think of no better example than Jaspar Milvain. The plot is well conceived and one does not object to the old device of the lost will being used here because it is given many clever aspects. Whether the hiding of the will was intentional or not, the reader finds an absorbing question. Swinnerton shows himself in this book to be a more clever draughtsman than for some years past.

## *CHAPTER VII*

## THE INFLUENCE OF GISSING ON SWINNERTON

The question of literary influence is a very delicate one and, however explicit the writer may be, it remains more a thing to be felt than stated. There are three kinds of influence in novel writing, the influence of form, the influence of style, and the influence of thought. The influence of form relates to plot and the definite details of a book's machinery : settings, number of characters, the length of time covered, and so forth. The influence of style is in the manner of a book, whether it be formal or informal, casual or deliberate, romantic or realistic. The influence of thought is the most general and the least easily perceived. It is found largely in the characters, who in their varying characteristics and views may present phases of the life of their day or of their race. The style is largely the expression of an author's literary personality (which may be quite a different thing from his actual personality) but the thought of a book is the expression of the author's character and mind, modified by his imagination.

George Gissing, as we have said, used in all of his novels (with the exception of one, *Eve's Ransom)*, the Victorian form. Swinnerton conceived his novels after a later pattern, with few characters, a minimum of plot, only the necessary amount of descriptive machinery, and — for interest — character analysis. There is no comparison here. In style, the second phase of influence I have suggested, Gissing — with his classic restraint, his strict formality of approach — carried on the Victorian tradition. There is but one point where he is different and that is in his psychological realism. Gissing in his minute study of character showed the modern style of presentation. But it is in his thought,

the third of our suggested phases of influence, that Gissing has made a lasting impression not only on Swinnerton but on many others, for Gissing introduced new elements of thought into the novel which made his work typical of the great period of intellectual awakening during which he lived.

Among the significant parallels in the careers of the two men it may be noted that Gissing and Swinnerton both wrote of life in London and the suburbs of London. This is natural as both lived there. Also they both struggled with poverty and knew the trials of daily toil, "the whip at the back", which can only appear as a curse to those who long to do creative work in literature or any other art. Furthermore, both of them at times when they were severely pressed to find adequate means of support still took their strength, their precious energy, to write novels — because they wanted to and because they believed in themselves. Both, after many discouragements — Gissing with his determined rejection and revision, and Swinnerton with those first three novels written but never published — have to a certain extent found success. Their fundamental difference lies not in their circumstances, which are strikingly similar, but in their different types of mind : Gissing, the classicist, the scholar, Swinnerton, the modern sophisticate, the clever writer of good prose.

As has been suggested, Swinnerton was reading Gissing at the time of the conception of his first novels. It would be strange indeed if there were no trace of influence to be found, especially when one considers the distinct personality, the strong individuality which made Gissing's novels akin to no others of his day. However, on account of the different schools of fiction to which the two men belong, the influence was one of thought rather than of form or of style. Certain similarities in thought suggest themselves immediately. There is no consciousness of religion in any of Swinnerton's novels. In *Shops and Houses* his only clergyman appears — and he is a sorry figure. Gissing in spite of his avowed agnosticism gives religion more of a place in the lives of his people than does Swinnerton. But both, on the whole, ignore in their characterization what is considered by the majority of thinking people to be the greatest of all influences on human nature.

Second, both Gissing and Swinnerton express an undeveloped

socialism in the form of a fierce resentment of poverty. In *The Nether World* and *Thyrza* Gissing expresses this against the background of the very poor, the common people to whom the need for daily bread is an ever pressing concern. Among the lower middle class, where there is money enough for food but not enough for the joyous expansion of self or care-free living, the revolt is against the restrictions of common life. In *Eve's Ransom* both Hilliard and Eve are haunted by the fear of a necessary return to daily labor; it marks their characters and undermines their courage. Swinnerton's *Coquette* is a study of the very poor and all the rebellion of the slums racks and burns in Sally Minto's heart.

" Sally was indeed fierce and resentful. It was with animosity that she put together the few sticks of rubbish which remained to them and helped her Mother to rearrange these things in a single room which they had taken on the other side of Holloway Road. No more for them the delights of Hornsey Road and three rooms ; but the confined space surrounded by these four dingy walls. What wonder that Sally was desperate for fresh air, for escape, and ran out of doors as soon as she could wriggle free ! What wonder that she walked quickly about the darkened streets ! Tears came to her eyes, and with clenched fists she secretly whimpered in this new angry despair. Of what avail ? She was alone, and the streets were dark ; and behind her lay that one room, gloomy and wretched, with a speechless ruminating Mother for solitary welcome ; and no hope — no hope. "

Swinnerton, in his study of that section of the middle class where desires are many and money scarce, portrays Vera in *The Elder Sister*, whose rebellion against conventions is as much due to her resentment of poor circumstances as her love for Mortimer.

" She did not hasten because the heat was so great ; but she walked briskly, in the effort to fight against her thoughts. She did not see the people she passed, or the ugly houses. She was thinking of all the things that made her feel a prisoner.

" ' If I could only... ' A hundred possibilities occurred to Vera. She wanted to escape — to escape from home, from office work, from days and days of doing the same task over and over again. She wanted sunshine, but freedom also to enjoy it..... She saw women who were better dressed than herself, and happy, laughing children ; the very distances which lay under her eye revived the longing for freedom. Instead of freedom Vera had her little home, her daily work. She never had money to spend, rarely fresh clothes to wear ; there were no compensations at all in her life, she felt. Everything was aimless repetition. Why ? What was the good of it ? Who was the better for it ? She was useless, a drudge, unhappy... "

This resentment toward repressing circumstances on the part of the characters of both Gissing and Swinnerton results in frequent contemplation of a state called "freedom". The desire of all of Gissing's heroes is a free life to do as one wishes all day long. This same desire racks Swinnerton's heroes and heroines, too — for in the later day at which Swinnerton is writing, heroines are in the business world and know the daily grind from nine to five as well as do the men. Not only do Anne and Vera *(The Elder Sister)* chafe under the trials of their poverty but Hilda and Gladys *(The Young Idea)* find life equally joyless. "'It was all very well,'" thinks Hilda, "'to tell Gertrude that your own life might be happy if you made it so, but to see the streets with their filth, and those sophisticated children parading along them'... Stone stairs were sanitary but she loathed them... The cheap little window panes through which one could see only shadows of the things that were..."

But the tragedy of poverty lies not in the sordid circumstances but in the temperaments of those people who are unfitted for such environment. Gissing writes in *Demos*, "It was her terrible misfortune to have feelings too refined for the position in which fate had placed her. Had she only been like those other girls in the work room!" And at another point in the same book, when the conditions of the poor and their poignant suffering have been discussed, he says, "Adella at times with difficulty restrained herself from crying, 'But it is a mistake. They have not the feelings you attribute to them. Such sufferings as you picture them enduring comes only of the poetry-fed soul at issue with fate.'" Swinnerton throughout his novels adopts this same attitude. In *Nocturne* he writes briefly but with complete understanding, "Neither Emmy nor Alf ever wondered why they should be working hard when the sun shone and the day was fine. Neither compared the lot accorded by station with an ideal fortune of blessed ease. They were not temperamentally restless."

In the descriptions of the squalid neighborhood where dwell the least fortunate of the residents of London we find that Gissing and Swinnerton have walked with ears attuned to the same discord and with hearts filled with the same discontent. This is Gissing's description as found in *Demos* :

" On the south is Hoxton, a region of malodorous market streets, of factories, timber yards, grimy warehouses, of alleys swarming with small trades and crafts, of filthy courts and passages leading into pestilential gloom ; everywhere toil in its most degrading forms ; the thoroughfares thundering with high laden wagons, the pavement trodden by working folk of the coarsest type, the corners and lurking-holes showing destitution at its ugliest. Walking northward, the explorer finds himself in freer air, amid broader ways, in a district of dwelling houses only ; the roads seem abandoned to milkmen, cat's meat venders, and costermongers. Here will be found streets in which every window has its card advertising lodgings ; others claim a higher respectability, the houses retreating behind patches of garden-ground, and occasionnally showing plastered pillars and a balcony. The change is from undisguised struggle for subsistence to mean and spirit-broken leisure ; hither retreat the better paid of the great-slave army when they are free to eat and sleep. To walk around a neighborhood such as this is the dreariest exercise to which man can betake himself, the heart is crushed by uniformity of decent squalor ; one remembers that each of these dead-faced houses, often each separate blind window, represents a ' home ', and the associations of the word whisper black despair. "

The following is Swinnerton's description of somewhat the same scene *(The Young Idea)* :

" Down one marketing-street he saw the usual Saturday-night scenes : the lighted ships, the pale-faced men, the stalls by the curb-side lighted with flaring, skerring naphtha lamps... He heard the shouting of the butcher, the greengrocer, the man at the provision stores, all joined in a great roar of confusing babble. His feet trod over the littered pavement as he turned away from the street ; he thought quickly of the contrast between this scene and the street as it would be on the next day, with cabbage leaves and torn newspaper and straw and general refuse lying about still, and the shops all shuttered... Perhaps the wreck of some of the stalls, divested of their waterproof covering, and bereft of their stock. London was in this aspect, a weary place, thought Galbraith ; a terrible life-destroying, scrambling place, where the things that one was forced to do were paralyzing, were nerve-racking and exhausting, and all the time worthless, aimless, endless. "

There is the same method of minute observation with the distaste slowly rising as the details accumulate until the spirit overflows in words of despair.

Both Gissing and Swinnerton frequently make use of literary allusions to assist in their characterization, on the theory that you may know a man by what he reads. I have collected something over forty examples of this in Gissing's novels, and no

characterization of Swinnerton's is seemingly complete until he has described his or her library. Gissing's favorite references were to classic works ; the book which he held most dear was Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.* Swinnerton now and then includes a similar reference which instantly reminds one of Gissing. For example in *Shops and Houses* Swinnerton wrote : " Only Mr. Vechantor, who always stayed in his room until the last minute, reading Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* was awaited. At last, he too came, having for the twentieth time savoured the wonderful account of Julian the Apostate, and the party was complete. " In *On the Staircase,* Velancourt bases his philosophy on the quotation from Dante's *Convivio* " Hell is the gratification of the evil choice ", and Henry Falconer in *Summer Storm* is troubled by the same idea. Frequently, in speaking of books, Swinnerton catches that loving tone which was so distinctive of Gissing's scholarly nature. This scene in Velancourt's room *(On the Staircase)* is typical ; either novelist might have written it :

" The room was warm, even close ; and his eyes went at once to the shelves, where his books stood shining in the glow of his enthusiasm. Very beautiful he thought them ; and indeed they made a brave show in the barely furnished room. Sometimes, when he could do nothing else, he used to sit and look at them, feeling a sense of their friendliness, their companionship... "

As we have indicated, the Gissing type of man is, in spite of the wide variety of his qualities, a very definite sort of person. Gissing himself was seeking to describe him when he wrote in that letter to Morley Roberts quoted in Chapter V " The most characteristic, the most important part of my work is that which deals with a class of young men distinctive of our time — well educated, fairly bred, but *without money.* " This type, as used by Gissing, may stretch all the way from the supersensitive irrationalism of Bernard Kingcote to the unmoral rationalism of Godwin Peak. But these men have a number of characteristics which they share in common : first, they are not at ease in company ; second, they scorn superficial society ; third, they have no religion ; fourth, they hate the daily toil which is made necessary by the poverty of their condition ; fifth, they are supersensitive and introspective ; sixth, they are fastidious concerning cleanliness, food, lodgings and clothing, etc. ; seventh,

they love books, especially high class books ; and eighth, they fear marriage, particularly in poverty. Now let us consider a few of Swinnerton's heroes and observe how closely they follow this Gissing type : first, Eric Galbraith *(The Young Idea)* ; second, Stephen More *(The Chaste Wife)* ; third, Roger Dennett *(The Happy Family)* ; fourth, Adrian Velancourt *(On the Staircase)* ; fifth, Mortimer *(The Elder Sister)* ; and sixth, Henry Falconer *(Summer Storm)*.

Eric Galbraith is an ambitious young man who is afraid of life and his own weakness ; he hates and resents poverty ; he loves books (as a part of his courting he loans to Hilda a copy of Plato, truly a Gissing choice) ; and he fears the result of a marriage without sufficient income.

" He could not bear to consider the idea of marriage, and a long engagement... Well, it was all right : there was no question of marriage. There never was. He wondered how Baggle had managed — oh, he knew well enough. A poky suburban flat, and pretentious poverty ; one little Baggle in due course ; and a hopeless objectless wrestling with a small salary and mean doings, and the snobbery of the poor. "

The keynote of Galbraith's nature and his relation to life is struck in that scene after he has unexpectedly proposed to Hilda and realizes with dread that he has taken upon himself a new responsibility for which he is unprepared.

" ' It comes to this, ' Galbraith said to himself coldly, ' I ' ve taken on a new responsibility, which is a thing I' ve no business to do : I'm bound by one more tie to the miserable life of mediocrity that I' ve been trying to escape from. I' m a sort of tenth rate fool who has'nt the courage to go through with anything, but I'm as ready as a willless man to drift into any sort of drivelling folly that the timidity of a thin soul will allow. The question is : what am I going to do ? There is home : there is Hilda : there is Mind : there is my living. Wherever I look, it's the same vile cramped hand. ' "

The pros and cons of marriage as revealed by Gissing in *New Grub Street* are the background of thought against which Galbraith is doing his reasoning. How can a man of refined temperament and desires take upon himself the obligations of marriage before he has been able to make any progress toward a substantial foothold on life ? Gissing, in bitter irony, suggests that if the man waits, by about fifty or sixty years of age, all may be ready.

The self doubt which tortures Galbraith also makes its impres-

sion on Stephen More *(The Chaste Wife)*, another man of similar character. Galbraith had a vision of self-revelation when he cried, "Thank God I don't imagine I can write!" Stephen More is a poor young man with literary aspirations which even carry him to that place haunted by the people of *New Grub Street*, the Reading Room of the British Museum. Stephen is the Gissing man in many particulars; he is fastidious, morbid, and horribly sensitive in society.

> "It was too bad to ask him to meet a crowd of people he did not know! With all the arrogance of the timid and solitary person he felt it as an affront. It made him conscious of his clothes and his dusty boots, his old hat, his ignorance of the etiquette governing conduct in such a group. And that nervous arrogance reacted upon his manner, making it almost noticeably brusque, and making him feel all the inconveniences resulting from the behavior of conventionally bred people toward those whom they regard as ill-bred, or toward those who regard themselves as ill-bred."

Poverty had weakened him, sapped his courage. He represents what Gissing called "the most pity-moving of all tragedies, a noble nature overcome by sordid circumstances" *(Demos)*. Priscilla, the girl whom More marries, had perceived this innate fineness and loved him for it. But Stephen is never able to forget his youth or to overcome the depression of spirits with which trial had left him.

> "Dirt seemed ingrained in the shabby buildings; the hurrying people and the noisy vehicles, so crowded upon the roadway, deepened Stephen's sense of dismay... every inch of the way made him suffer once more the old feeling of being crushed, the defiant hatred of poverty, the bitter dread of the triumph of unkindness. To him as he walked, thinking not of himself but of Roy, it seemed that any misdemeanour might be forgiven a rebellious dweller among such overwhelming dreariness."

Stephen More is much like Edward Reardon in *New Grub Street*, never able to forget the past, always fearing, doubting the future. Besides being sensitive in society and depressed by the conditions of his poverty, he begrudges the time spent in uncongenial work, the hours of pleasant reading and writing which he must forgo. Furthermore he entertains such fears of marriage that the brave Priscilla has innumerable difficulties in accomplishing her desires.

Roger Dennett *(The Happy Family)* is a more independent

and assured person than is characteristic of the Gissing hero; however, his revolt against middle class family life as represented by the Amersons, and his futile self-questioning, and indecision of purpose, proclaim a restless temperament, although well under control.

Adrian Velancourt *(On the Staircase)* is a study of the morose, idealistic, ineffectual type of man for whom Gissing had so much sympathy. Velancourt suffers from that sense of an innate frustration of purpose which made Edward Reardon (in *New Grub Street)* a failure, and the feeling of personal futility in never attaining a marriage which would be spiritually satisfying, which drove Biffin *(New Grub Street)* to suicide and sent Godwin Peak *(Born in Exile)* to a life in exile. Velancourt in a moment of lonely weakness makes love to Cissie, a common girl who serves his meals. Cissie belongs in that category of "unpresentable wives" concerning whom Gissing was so bitter. Velancourt after some ineffectual attempts to interest Cissie in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, the poetry of Keats, and other things far beyond her, begins to realize that Cissie and he will never be congenial. He meets Barbara Gretton and sees in her the possible woman whom he might have wed — had he waited. The losing of his position, the dread of which had constantly hung over him since marriage, finally unbalances his mind and he commits suicide in very much the same way that Biffin did. Furthermore Velancourt in the face of life shows that same nervous incapability, that wretched supersensitiveness, which ruined Kingcote's life *(Isabel Clarendon)*. In fact every line which Swinnerton has written concerning Velancourt recalls some figure of Gissing's, some scene in one of Gissing's novels.

Mortimer in *The Elder Sister* is a character similar to More and Velancourt but with less idealism and stronger desires. It is Mortimer's egotism, his self-pride which gnaws at his happiness — the thought of his own social inferiority enrages him.

"An hour later he stood within sight of Blankenburg's; and began to walk up and down in the shadow. The fact that he had to wait humiliated him. It humiliated him always to be subordinate, to have to do with subordinates. It humiliated him to realize that those he knew were all subordinate. There was not one among them who was free. All alike had to be called hurriedly and secretly to the telephone when he needed them, had to smother and curtail their conversation because they might be missed and needed by those who em-

ployed them. They conversed with him in fear of reprimand from some superior. All were slaves.

" It was a humiliation the more that he should be so furtive in love.

" So this was business ? the life in which so that he could see Vera he must submit himself to the impertinence of boys, the questioning of other people in a department... the life in which she, answering him, must be hurried, secret, because she was forced to speak where she was overheard, because she was not supposed to wish to speak upon the telephone during business hours. The minutes were regarded as stolen. For a wage she had sold her time and her attention for so many hours a day.

" Were men and women helots that they were expected to confine their lives to extra office hours ? Mortimer exclaimed at the picture. His humiliation was extreme. Was this really an age of democracy ? Of course it was not : every employer demanded feudal rights over his servants ; but he would accept no feudal responsibility..... A vicious circle indeed ! There was no tyranny more abject than the tyranny of slaves ! It was the tyranny of fear. Poor slaves ! Poor slaves indeed. They knew not that they were slaves. But what humiliation for those who could feel. "

In *The Odd Woman* Gissing with powerful irony discusses the relation between Monica and her employers and their preposterous claim on her every daylight hour. Also as we have said in the hearts of all of Gissing's men there burned a fierce resentment of the bonds of toil and the implied stigma of social inferiority. Mortimer is not only sensitive but fastidious. In watching the evening crowd, " he could imagine every arch ' Bye-bye... Be good.! ' ' Oo, I'll *try*... Hee hee ! ' and the malicious picture which formed in his mind gave neither pleasure nor ease. " He is intense in his individualism, his bitterness awakened by the knowledge of the futility of his desires makes of him a Sidney Kirkwood *(The Nether World)* in personal rebellion.

" ' First there's freedom, ' said Mortimer coolly. ' Freedom, which you would call selfishness. '

" ' Oh, *that* kind of freedom ! ' exclaimed Anne under her breath. He was the more angered. His voice grew the cooler... until it held insolence.

" ' Freedom to disregard others in one's own search for happiness. Liberty of the soul. There's passion — all the emotional energy that this world of safety mongers is blanketing. There's adventure. There's renown. There are poetry and danger and splendour. There's despair. There's real love and real hatred. Anguish and horror and exultation. These are very different things from the creeping timidity of the

herd. You don't like them, eh ? You don't like them, eh ? You don't like them ? ' "

Mortimer is the Gissing man in his most vital form, the egotistic warrior against the restrictions of common life.

The antisocial viewpoint is not so clearly defined in Henry Falconer *(Summer Storm)*. As I have suggested previously Swinnerton here desired to draw a new type — to Falconer there only clings such characteristic features of individualism as Swinnerton found indispensable. Falconer has an independent income so his problem is not how to have time to do what he wants, but what to do in the time that he has. " But time still threatened. There were hours and hours of the day ; there might be hours and waking hours of the night, and then another day, other days... ' Oh God... ' groaned Falconer blankly. He was facing the future. " Harvey Rolfe in *The Whirlpool,* one of the few Gissing men to have an income, was faced with the same problem and settled it in the same way as Falconer does — by marriage. Falconer suffers from the sensitiveness which is the result of loneliness and the restless hours of introspection. In true Gissing fashion he overestimates his own weakness and dwells on the aimlessness of his life. " What a fool ; what a lonely dispirited fool he suddenly felt himself ! The sense was overwhelming. It swept through him in a flood. " One feels quite certain that if it were not for his income, Falconer would be railing at poverty as vehemently as does Mortimer.

The influence of Gissing's thought is not of course confined to these six heroes of Swinnerton's whom I have discussed. They simply serve as outstanding examples because they show so plainly their relationship to the Gissing man — the type of character which Gissing considered his most significant work. But Gissing on the whole spread a wider canvas and assembled a larger group so that in contrast with any modern author he takes on the magnitude of the Victorian giants of fiction. One cannot select a character or a novel and say, there is the complete Gissing, — because even after years of study there will always be more to find. One may take up afresh one of those great novels, *Isabel Clarendon, Born in Exile* or *The Whirlpool,* and be amazed anew at the mind which conceived it, and at the personality whose stamp it bears. Gissing, in spite of his critics, is not a small figure in literature.

It is really unfair to contrast Gissing and Swinnerton in a conclusion, because the former is a novelist of established note and the latter a man whose work is incomplete. But the matter of influence has in Swinnerton's seventeen novels full evidence for a decision, for in most of them one finds clear traces of that undeveloped social rebellion, that chafing against the bonds of sordid circumstance which is so particularly the Gissing note in fiction. However, we must not make too much of the portrayals of the very poor in either author's work. The actual slums are only found in Gissing's *The Nether World*, *Demos* and *Thyrza* and in Swinnerton's *Coquette*. It is with the lower middle class that both are preëminently concerned. Both show their sympathetic kinship with the man whose intelligence is superior to that of those who surround him, and whose sensitive temperament is constantly in battle with the uncongenial elements of lower middle class life.

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